Pandora Hearts

パンドラハーツ

Caucus Race

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CAUCUS RACE
CANDY DROPS
Caucus race 2
Caucus race 2

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Pandora Hearts

Caucus Race

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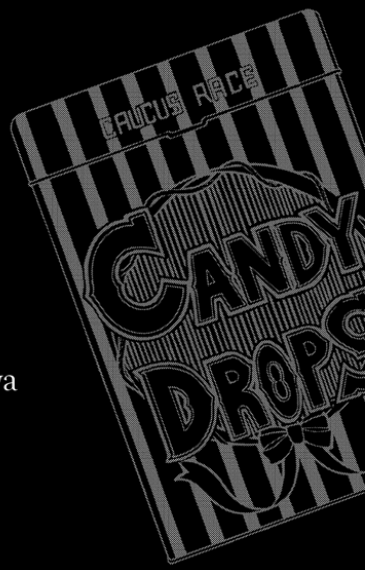

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YEN ON
NEW YORK

Why, hello. Here we are again.

This is the third…no, the fourth time I've run into you here, I believe.

Hmm? Ah, it's the fifth? Beg pardon. I forgot.

I'm quite easygoing, you see; I'm no good at remembering times and things. Don't be angry with me.

That's right, it's my temperament.

Well, well. You even have a rather fine tea ready for us today.

Such consideration really lifts the spirits. Yes, it's delicious.

You know, I didn't think you had it in you to be this considerate.

…Whoops. My apologies. I shouldn't have said that, even if it was exactly what I was thinking.

Ah, and I see that may have been best left unsaid as well. I do apologize. Don't be angry.

I tend to say just what I'm thinking, without softening the edges. Yes, that's temperament as well.

Oh, I see. You didn't prepare this tea? It was a present?

Hmm. Then you really are… No, never mind.

Now then, you were waiting for me. What sort of story did you want today?

……

I see. About life, hmm? That's a rather broad topic…

Is something troubling you?

Oho. You may have found your life partner.

That's wonderful. My sincere congratulations.

Ah, but you aren't sure whether you should accept this individual's suit?

Hmm, yes, that's a knotty problem.

Life is long and filled with hardship. In order to see it through without regret, you need a partner who's irreplaceable.

If you choose the wrong one, though… That's right, it will all come to nothing.

Well, now. Let's see.

…In that case, why don't I tell you about several examples I'm familiar with, stories of individuals and their respective partners?

You might not think it to look at me, but observing such people is a hobby of mine.

Use them as references, if you would, to help make your own life a happy one.

All right. Then I'll begin.

The Story
of
the Mutuality

BLUE ROSE

Blue Coronation

Behold that flower

Blooming in night's shade,
its petals tinged with blue,
yet noble still…

Elliot Nightray

ONE WEEKEND.

It was after school, and soft sunlight streamed into the library.

Lutwidge Academy set great store by tradition and formality, and none of its students were the type who made noise in libraries. There were many students in the hall, with its rows of stacks, but the only sounds were hushed conversations and soft footfalls, and nothing disturbed the tranquil atmosphere.

Boys wore white swallowtail coats, navy blue vests, and white trousers, while girls wore white blazers and skirts.

The sun-warmed library was filled with the distinctive scent of books.

"You're borrowing that one again. You really like it, don't you?"

A boy with one tuft of hair that flipped straight up, right in front, pulled a book from one of the shelves, earning that remark from the shaggy-haired classmate who stood next to him.

The boy drew his eyebrows together slightly, directing a sharp glance at his neighbor.

"…What's wrong with that? Good stuff is good no matter how many times you read it."

"The title's fairly hackneyed. *Holy Knight*."

"*Classic.* Call it *classic*."

As the boy argued back, he tucked the book he'd taken under his elbow.

He had no way to see his classmate's face, hidden as it was by his long, untrimmed hair and glasses. However, after spending two years with him, the boy knew his expressions like the back of his own hand. …He knew he'd be feigning ignorance, straight-faced.

"Don't be mad. I was just stating my opinion, Elliot. I'm not criticizing your tastes."

At his classmate's nonchalant answer, the boy—Elliot—clicked his tongue irritably.

Elliot Nightray, aged sixteen.

He was a son of the House of Nightray, one of the four great dukedoms that held tremendous power in this country, and, at present, he was a fourth-year student at Lutwidge Academy.

He was high-minded, severe, and outspoken.

He had strong-willed eyebrows, sharp eyes, and platinum blonde hair that took on a blue tint when the light hit it just right. All these things combined to make this boy, in his Lutwidge Academy uniform, seem somehow difficult to approach.

Some considered the teardrop mole at the outside corner of his left eye to be one of his charms, but it didn't do much to soften his sharp appearance.

"Listen up, Leo. See, the Holy Knight series is…"

Elliot began to speak, his voice filled with enthusiasm.

However, his classmate—Leo—briskly put out a hand and cut him off, saying, "I don't need to hear that again, thanks."

Leo was also sixteen.

He was from the House of Fianna, a home for orphans operated by the Nightrays.

Two years before, Elliot, who'd been having trouble choosing a valet, had encountered him in the House of Fianna's bookroom. Immediately thereafter, they'd quarreled at the top of their lungs… Following that worst of all possible first meetings, after several twists and turns and over the objections of those around him, Elliot had chosen Leo to be his valet.

Leo might have been a valet, but he treated Elliot like an equal and did just as he pleased. He never gave a thought to his master's convenience. He looked calm and collected, but in Elliot's words, he was actually "touchy and quarrelsome," and it wasn't at all uncommon for him to pepper his master with sharp words.

The phrase that best described Leo would have been "incurable bookworm."

Actually, even "incurable" might have been an understatement.

Leo picked up the sentence he'd made Elliot drop:

"The Holy Knight series is an ode to heroism that sets up an ideal for nobles, knights, and other chosen ones by following the footsteps of the protagonist, Edwin, and is a textbook for 'how men should live,' et cetera. You've told me a million times, and anyway, I've read through it myself, so I know."

On hearing this, said indifferently and all at once, Elliot looked a bit daunted.

He snorted crossly, then sent a mild glare at the five thick books Leo was hugging to his chest.

"So, what are *you* borrowing? Five of 'em at once…"

"Oh, these?"

As Leo explained, a cheerful buoyancy shone through his unaffected words.

"This one's a mystery novel, *Festival of the Double Helix*. People say the author's style is old-fashioned, but his descriptions have real depth, and I like that. This is a classic about logic, this is a biology text about the ecology of reptiles, and then there's a dictionary of names, and—"

"Hold it. I already know you read crazy stuff that's all over the map, but what's the point of reading a dictionary of names? It's just…names."

Elliot cut in, looking dumbfounded. Leo smiled.

“It’s interesting. When I’m reading, I think about the names and imagine what sort of lives the people lived. This will keep me entertained for a week.”

“……Book nut.”

Leo seemed mystified by Elliot’s mutter. “What’s odd about that?”

Everything, Elliot thought, but he grimaced and said, “Knock yourself out.” The two moved away from the stacks. Leo already had a book open and was starting to read. “Control yourself until we get back to our room,” Elliot warned him.

The two of them went to the information corner and completed the check-out procedures. Elliot finished first, and while Leo was checking out his five books, he stood a little ways away, looking cross.

“……”

Abruptly, Elliot turned back and took a long look at the shelf that held the Holy Knight series.

The volume he’d taken had left a gap like a missing tooth.

“What’s the matter, Elliot?”

Leo spoke to him; he’d finished the procedures. Elliot shook his head, absently.

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

He and Leo left the library.

The corridor was filled with students spending their afterschool hours as they pleased. Unlike in the library, loud, cheerful, lively voices joined in animated conversations here and there. Several students sneaked surreptitious glances at Elliot. Evading them coldly, Elliot began to walk.

Just then, from beside him, Leo murmured, “Oh, that’s right.”

When Elliot glanced at him, Leo was awkwardly balancing his stack of five books, with one hand in the back pocket of his coat. Then:

“Here, this is for you.”

Carelessly, Leo held the object he’d extracted out to Elliot.

It was a deep blue leather bookmark, with a design stamped on it in gold foil.

“……What’s this?”

HOLY KNIGHT
THE GREAT SAGA OF DUEL ED

Elliot took the bookmark, looked at it, then realized the design was linked to Holy Knight. It showed the silhouettes of Edwin, the protagonist, and his valet, Edgar. For a moment, Elliot looked pleased, but he soon grew dubious.

"I bought it yesterday. …Since you're the type who takes time to read a book."

"Was today something special? It's not my birthday."

"No, it's nothing like that. I just wanted you to have it."

Leo smiled cheerfully. In contrast, Elliot's expression clouded rapidly.

"…What are you plotting? Getting presents from you is creepy."

"*Elliooot!* If you can't accept kindness from others gracefully, you won't grow into a decent adult."

"Everything you do every day is *making* me like this!"

As he retorted, Elliot's brow was furrowed. He glanced at the bookmark in his hand.

For a while, he gazed at it as if it was something suspect and dangerous, but finally he shoved it into the back pocket of his coat. Walking in front of Leo, Elliot started down the sunny corridor. He didn't look back. With a little snort, he said:

"…Well, I guess there's no help for it. I'll take it for you."

* * *

Lutwidge Academy, Elliot and Leo's school, was considered to be the most prestigious of all prestigious schools.

The sons and daughters of the nobility, the nation's elite, spent six years here, from ages thirteen to eighteen, being trained to become the future leaders of society and those destined to support those leaders.

Lutwidge Academy was a boarding school, and during their six years of attendance, male and female students lived in their own dormitories.

In the dorms, students were placed in rooms of six from the first year to the third year, in order to learn the manners and attitudes required for group living. Students in the higher forms lived in rooms of two. The only ones to receive private rooms, even among the upper forms, were a handful of students known as "prefects."

"…Tch."

They'd left the school building and were walking toward the boys' dorm when Elliot clicked his tongue softly and stopped in his tracks.

Leo, who'd been walking beside him, stopped as well.

The brick path that led to the boys' dorm wound through a sparse grove of maple trees. About halfway down that path, right where it entered the grove, was a group of male students: four or five boys

surrounding one smaller boy.

They were standing in a ring, throwing a little bottle to each other as if playing catch, while the boy in the center of the circle chased after it.

This wasn't a fun, friendly game. The smaller student looked as if he might cry at any moment, and the boys who surrounded him wore sadistic smirks.

Elliot knew all of them.

"A~ah, they've got him again, don't they."

Leo's voice was calm. He'd followed Elliot's gaze and seen the students.

"…Stupid…"

Elliot spit out the word in a low voice, then took *Holy Knight* from under his arm and held it out to Leo. Leo accepted it with a practiced motion and a "Yes, yes."

Elliot stepped into the grove. He walked toward the students, crushing fallen leaves underfoot.

Even as the two of them approached, neither the smaller student nor the ring of students who were teasing him noticed.

The student who had the little bottle tried to throw it to his friend, but his aim was off, and it went toward Elliot instead. It flew in a high arc, and Elliot caught it. The texture of hard glass. The swaying, splashing black liquid inside it.

It was a bottle of ink.

Elliot had caught it one-handed, and as he rolled it around on his palm, a low murmur rose from the boys. Their voices were startled and bewildered, and every eye was focused on Elliot. Some said his name, while others said the name of the House of Nightray.

Although Nightray was one of the four great dukedoms, the nation's heroes, the family was suspected of betrayal during the Tragedy of Sablier a century before, and even now, dark rumors clung to its name. This was the family to which Elliot belonged.

The students and teachers around him held awe and envy for the dukedoms…but at the same time, there was a feeling of distance with regard to the House of Nightray that was unlike anything directed at the other families. This was the sort of atmosphere that surrounded Elliot at school. Many people looked at him, but very few approached him.

Of course, Elliot would never have chosen to keep his head down and live quietly for fear of false rumors and backbiting. As a result, many of the school's students saw Elliot as "aloof" and difficult to approach.

"You guys…are an eyesore."

Elliot's declaration was ruthless. Possibly they were overawed by his imposing attitude: As he strode into the ring of students, the circle broke.

Elliot walked right up to the smaller student, who'd slumped to the ground in the center of the circle.

He sent one piercing glare at the students who surrounded them. — Then, from near his feet, a faint voice said, “E-Elliot-kun…”

Elliot lowered his glowering eyes. A timid face was looking up at him.

Like Elliot, the boy was a fourth-year student, and they lived in the same dorm. His name was Marcel. His build was so delicate that he seemed better suited to the girls’ uniform than the boys’, and as a result, he was often teased.

“Here.

“It’s yours, right?” Elliot said, and he tossed the little bottle at him. Marcel caught it with both hands.

“Uh, uh-huh. —Oh, no, I, um…”

At that noncommittal response, Elliot instantly began to radiate prickly irritation. Marcel shuddered and gave a small “Eek!” Just then, Leo—who’d followed Elliot and was standing behind him—put in an astute word for Marcel.

“I think that’s probably Gerald’s.”

“Ahn?” Elliot turned to look back at Leo, prickly aura and all.

“Marcel is Gerald’s assistant, you know.”

“Hm? Oh. Right. —So, what, you’re on an errand?”

As he spoke, he turned back to Marcel. The boy was nodding vigorously.

Gerald was one of the handful of prefects for Elliot’s dorm. The many students who lived in the dorms were split into several groups, with one prefect placed in charge of each group and expected to give everyday guidance. Gerald was the prefect in charge of the group Elliot and Leo belonged to. However, possibly because he felt daunted by the four great dukedoms, he didn’t want much to do with Elliot, and they hardly ever saw each other. Elliot thought things were more comfortable that way, too.

Prefects were given the right to choose one student from a lower grade as an assistant to handle personal tasks for them.

Gerald had chosen Marcel.

“Um, Gerald-san told me to go buy some ink for him, because he was out…”

“He did, huh?”

Elliot waved one hand, uninterested, as if to say, *That doesn’t really matter.*

“…Never mind that.”

Sheathed in cold anger, once again, he glared at the students around him.

Every face belonged to a student who lived in Elliot’s dorm, from first-years to third-years. He’d interrupted the younger students’ hard-earned fun, and they couldn’t quite keep their displeasure out of their expressions, but no one said anything aloud.

They were edging back, sure from the glitter in Elliot’s eyes that they

were about to be lectured.

However—

"You little—!! You're an upperclassman! Don't let junior students push you around!!"

Looking down at Marcel, Elliot roared at him furiously.

"Fweh?!"

"Don't give me 'fweh'! When your family sent you here, they entrusted you with their honor! That means you don't let younger guys — No, it doesn't matter who they are! Don't disgrace yourself like that in front of *anybody!* You're a nobleman! Have some pride! Walk tall! Work on your swordsmanship! Take your scrawny—"

"Elliot. Elliot."

From behind Elliot, Leo tugged at his sleeve.

"*What?!*" Elliot answered, still roaring.

"Quiet down," Leo said, covering his ears.

"You're scolding the wrong guy. I'm not saying Marcel isn't to blame for any of it, but…"

"Who cares?! I—This guy's—"

"And besides, you're attracting lots and lots of attention. You don't mind?"

"……Huh?"

Elliot looked around. Several students stood on the path that linked the school buildings with the dorms. It was a rather sizable crowd.

Most of them were probably students who'd just happened to be passing by when they stopped. They kept their distance, and although the looks directed his way were nervous, they were all intensely interested. Elliot stood out even when he wasn't doing anything, and now he was the solid center of attention.

"……Rrgh…"

Elliot's temperature came back down all at once.

"It's a shame to waste the audience. Why don't you wave?"

"Like hell!"

Elliot turned away from the easygoing Leo, fixing his rumpled uniform. With a brusque "Let's go" for Leo, he left the scene. The students who'd formed the circle, realizing they were being left behind and assuming they'd escaped without a rebuke, breathed sighs of relief.

Just then:

"You, too!"

Elliot stopped, turning around.

"If you call yourselves noblemen, don't use dirty tricks like this. Settle things fair and square, man-to-man.

"*Have you no shame?!*" he said, his voice low and harsh.

Although he wasn't yelling, his tone cut them down ruthlessly with the blade of his integrity.

When he finished speaking, Elliot flared his coattails wrothfully and

stalked off with Leo.

Until they were out of sight, not one student managed to move.

Then.

Finally. Marcel, who'd collapsed with the ink bottle cradled in his hands, gave a sigh.

He was looking in the direction where Elliot had disappeared, and his expression held deep gratitude at having been rescued.

…That wasn't all.

"Elliot-kun is *sooooooooo cool*…"

He sighed ardently as he spoke. Then, with a muttered "Oh!," Marcel happily took a notebook from his breast pocket. He opened it and began to write something. The cover of the notebook held the words: *Elliot-kun —Record of Exploits*.

* * *

"—And Gerald, too. He could at least buy his own ink—"

They were walking down the path to the boys' dorm.

Abruptly, as Elliot muttered to himself, Leo said, "It was him." Elliot looked perplexed. "What was him?"

Leo spoke as if it was nothing important:

"The one who egged on those younger students."

"……Huh?"

"He ordered Marcel to go buy the ink, and then he ordered the underclassmen to keep him from doing it."

"How do you know *that*?"

In answer to Elliot's question, Leo said, "Coincidence."

Blue Rose Club

THAT SAME DAY, A MOMENT BEFORE EVENING.

In the center of the Lutwidge Academy campus was a quadrangle carpeted with lush green grass, and in the quadrangle were many girls and boys who'd been released from their strict classes.

Some students spent the time until dinner reading on the benches. Others chatted with their friends. Still others cut through the quadrangle on their way to club or volunteer activities.

In a corner of the quadrangle, on a terrace made of white brick, several female students were demurely enjoying their afternoon tea.

All the seats at the three-legged tables were occupied by girls.

"—All right. Let us begin for today."

The statement came from a graceful young lady who had been sitting at a table, quietly sipping from her teacup.

The girls who sat around the table with her, and the girls who sat at other tables, all smiled and nodded: “Yes, let’s.” The scene was exquisitely elegant and delicate. The terrace overflowed with refinement.

“Now then. Who will make the first report?”

Prompted by the girl who’d opened the meeting, one of the students seated at the next table over raised her hand: “Josephine-sama. May I…?” At that, Josephine, the girl responsible for the gathering, nodded gently. “If you would.”

Having received permission, even as she exuded impatience to begin immediately, the girl took the time to calmly, slowly raise her teacup to her lips. Not a single student complained about this pretentious behavior. All that happened was that the atmosphere of expectation grew stronger.

The girl returned her teacup to the table, drew a breath, and spoke.

“Today, I chanced to witness ‘Master Blue Rose’ sneezing.”

Immediately…

A collective cry of “Oh, *my*!” rose from the tables. On hearing that report, all the girls around the tables began talking at once. Although perfectly proper and chaste, their voices held delight and enthusiasm.

“But how rare!”

“Yes, it is quite rare.”

“Is it rarer than when his stomach was heard to growl the other day, I wonder?”

“I think it’s a close thing. For myself, I really couldn’t say which is superior.”

“Wait, my dears. The important bit is what came after.”

“Of course, as you say.”

“Yes, the highlight of the stomach growl was when Master Blue Rose blushed.”

“That raised the score significantly.”

“Our spirited Master Blue Rose, and his cheeks were as red as apples…”

“Ah, how I would have loved to be there.”

“Truly.”

“Truly.”

“Truly.”

“—And?”

Josephine, who’d been watching the discussion that seemed set to go on forever, gravely questioned the girl who’d reported the sneeze.

“How was it? What did Master Blue Rose do following the sneeze?”

The girl nodded. The other girls turned their attention to the continuation of the report; no one interrupted.

For a brief moment, silence reigned on the terrace. Then:

"'The other' was beside him, and came very near to wiping his nose with a kerchief…"

"Yes?" The girls leaned in.

"…And he swung his fist and warded him off!"

Once again, cries of "Oh, *my*!" rang out. They were much louder than before.

The girls' delighted discussion sprang to life again. True, the score for a blushing, embarrassed Master Blue Rose was quite high. However, everyone assembled here agreed that, aesthetically, his virtues were his spirit and his pride.

"Then it's unanimous. No doubt this report will shine brilliantly in the annals of the Blue Rose Club."

At Josephine's words, statements of "No objection" and elegant applause rose from every table.

THE BLUE ROSE CLUB.

This was what the group of girls who met on the terrace in the afternoons to discuss the individual known as "Master Blue Rose" called themselves.

Very few people at Lutwidge Academy knew of the group's existence. This was due in large part to the fact that its activities were secret, and not conducted publically. At present, most of the participants gathered here were from the upper forms, girls from the fifth and sixth years.

Their formal name was The Society of Young Ladies who Admire Master Blue Rose.

Who was this Master Blue Rose, and who was "the other" who had appeared in the report?

Well…

* * *

"Elliot? What's the matter? You hunched up all of a sudden."

A room in the boys' dorm.

Leo spoke to Elliot, who was sprawled on the bed reading *Holy Knight*.

Leo was sitting on the floor, leaning against the edge of the bed. His hands held the biology text he'd just checked out. As they'd been reading, Elliot had suddenly flinched, quite violently, and hunched his shoulders.

Elliot sat up, leaving the book open, and shook his head, answering awkwardly. "…Dunno."

Leo didn't seem terribly interested.

"You do things like that sometimes, you know."

“Nah, I just got this abrupt chill… Made me shiver.”

“Ah-ha-ha. Weirdo.”

“Shut up.”

“Make sure you don’t catch cold. I don’t want to have to take care of you.”

“Hey. Valets don’t say stuff like that.”

“Well, I’d wrap a leek around your neck, at least.”

When Leo mentioned this “time-honored folk remedy” which he’d read about in a book, Elliot grimaced. “……A leek?” “Mm-hmm,” Leo muttered briefly, and that ended their discussion of the chill.

Leo’s eyes returned to the book in his hand, and he immersed himself in reading again—

…Or he seemed to.

“Someone could be talking about you. You are pretty famous.”

He spoke without lifting his eyes from the book.

Elliot snorted. He glanced at the room’s window.

“…Stupid,” he muttered irritably.

* * *

“I saw Master Blue Rose act as arbitrator in a bullying incident.”

The report that followed the sneeze dealt with the recent incident in the maple grove.

However, the report drew several comments—“I saw that as well,” “So did I”—and the girl who had made it looked slightly disappointed.

Still:

“Risking himself to protect the weak is a fine example of Master Blue Rose behavior.”

At Josephine’s praise, the girl who’d made the report broke into a happy smile.

At the words “fine example,” the other girls nodded in agreement: *That’s true.* Then the cheerful, lively discussion started up again.

A short while later, as if she’d been waiting for the gathering’s enthusiasm to die down somewhat, Josephine spoke.

“Now then, my dears. I have another splendid piece of news for you today.”

Those words made her the focus of the girls’ attention. They were unable to hide their building expectations: *“Splendid news”? …Could it be…?* Josephine, her face composed, lifted her teacup to her lips and quietly drained its contents.

Returning the teacup to the table in a picture-perfect gesture, she slipped her index and middle fingers into the breast pocket of her white blazer.

Slowly, she drew them out. Pinched between her fingertips was a

folded scrap of paper.

"We received a letter from Gardener 'M' today."

At Josephine's words, a dainty commotion filled the terrace. These letters were the most precious and important element of the Blue Rose Club's activities.

The identity of the sender, Gardener "M," was unknown. The letters always warned them not to pry.

However, the important thing wasn't Gardener "M"'s identity. The letters that were sent regularly to the Blue Rose Club held detailed, pitch-perfect descriptions of a Master Blue Rose the girls could never know, including his life in the boys' dorm, which they were forbidden to enter.

Finding herself the focus of all those expectant stares, Josephine opened the scrap of paper, taking her time and acting particularly self-important. It was a single sheet of stationery.

"I shall read it aloud. 'This morning, in the cafeteria, some vegetables he didn't like showed up at breakfast. When he tried to leave them, his valet admonished him. As he stuffed his face, annoyed, he looked like a lordly squirrel'—"

At every anecdote that was read to them, the Blue Rose Club members raised their voices in admiration and praise.

When she'd read the letter through, taking plenty of time, Josephine told them, "That is all."

After they'd listened the whole way through, "Satisfaction!" was written on every girl's face. The older girls' skin even seemed a bit brighter and smoother.

Josephine wound up the affair by saying that the day's meeting had been another good, fruitful one, and then:

"I think it's time we dispersed for today."

She adjourned the meeting. …However, almost immediately, she seemed to remember something. Her eyes turned in a certain direction.

"Matilda. You stay here, please."

At the other end of Josephine's gaze, the girl called Matilda nodded wordlessly.

Unusually for a member of the group, Matilda had remained silent throughout the reports on Master Blue Rose and the ensuing discussion. As a rule, she spoke only a few words, and she had so little presence that she seemed a bit ghostlike, but she was a legitimate member of the Blue Rose Club.

The other girls exchanged cheerful good-byes and went their separate ways. As evening approached, only the two of them remained on the terrace. Under a sky that had begun to turn vermilion, Josephine smiled and walked over to Matilda, calling her name in confidential tones. "Matilda."

"……Yes, Josephine-sama."

“How is Project Coronation progressing?”

“Smoothly. The day of Master Blue Rose’s coronation is drawing near.”

“—I see.”

Smiling in satisfaction at Matilda’s words, Josephine patted her head.

“That’s marvelous.”

Ada Vessalius

THE FIRST MORNING OF THE WEEK.

As she sat up in bed in her dim room, the girl yawned.

“Fua……”

The sky she glimpsed through the gap in the curtains was cloudy. It looked as if it might rain at any minute.

The girl’s name was Ada Vessalius. She was eighteen.

A daughter of the House of Vessalius, one of the four great dukedoms, she was currently in her sixth year at Lutwidge Academy, a student in the highest grade. At school, she belonged to the disciplinary committee.

This was one of the secondary Vessalius residences, and it was located quite close to the school. On the weekends, Ada returned to this mansion, then went to school from there.

She had the same blond hair as her brother and features that, although they’d grown to match her age, still held something childlike. Even though she’d been born into a family that was in a position of supreme authority as one of the four great dukedoms, she was pleasant and kind to others and had a generous personality, and sometimes her friends said she was too open and trusting.

Today, Ada had awakened thirty minutes earlier than usual. For that reason, perhaps, she was still a bit sleepy.

Still: Today was an important day. She mustn’t sleep in.

“Good morning, Snowdrop and Kitty.”

She greeted her two pet cats, who were on top of the comforter, watching her. The cats responded with simultaneous mews.

When Ada stirred restlessly, they leapt lightly down from the bed to the floor.

Ada pushed the comforter back and climbed out of bed, too. She stretched luxuriously. Then, with impeccable timing, there was a knock at the door. Yesterday, she’d told a servant at what time she’d be waking up this morning, and that servant called to her through the door: “My lady, your breakfast is ready.”

“Coming,” said Ada. She put on a dressing gown over her nightclothes and started for the door.

After a light breakfast in the dining room, Ada changed into her uniform and left the mansion. The two cats followed her. At the front

door, Ada turned to the cats, crouching down as they tried to come out.

Holding up an index finger, she lectured them, speaking slowly and clearly.

"No, Snowdrop. No, Kitty. I can't take you to school with me."

The cats mewed, as if asking "Why?"

"Discipline Reinforcement Week starts today. I'm on the disciplinary committee. If I take you with me, I'll be setting a bad example.

"*Understand?*" she asked them, making doubly sure.

It was Discipline Reinforcement Week, and this was the all-important first day. That was why she'd gotten up early.

It wasn't clear whether or not the cats had understood what Ada told them. They just mewed.

"You two be good. Mind the house for me. All right, I'll be back."

On that note, Ada closed the front door and set off briskly.

She walked down the flagstone avenue in front of the mansion. When she'd gone a short ways, she turned, just once, peeking back at the mansion. The door was closed. Were the cats on the other side, mewing with loneliness? She resolved to play with them for a good long time when she came home again.

"Okay. I've got to hurry."

Murmuring to herself, Ada returned her gaze to the end of the avenue.

It would be terrible if she were to be late during Discipline Reinforcement Week. As a member of the disciplinary committee, she had to model the rules of Lutwidge Academy for the other students. To that end, she thought, she had to discipline herself constantly.

Onii-chan, I'm doing my best!

Silently, she called to her big brother, Oz Vessalius, who'd been missing for a decade.

With a determined expression on her childlike face, Ada began to walk faster.

"Yeek?!"

…Then she tripped on the edge of a paving stone and fell.

Elliot Nightray

THE FIRST DAY OF DISCIPLINE
REINFORCEMENT WEEK. AFTER SCHOOL.

"…Oh. Forgot something."

Leo muttered, shortly, and turned on his heel. They were in a cramped back garden behind the Lutwidge Academy school building. The silent garden held nothing but a small flower bed. In the afternoon, the building blocked most of the sunlight, and no students gathered there.

"Hey, Leo!"

Elliot called to Leo's back as he strode off, but Leo didn't respond; he just disappeared into the school building.

"Huhn… You'd think he was the only person on the planet. Jerk."

Even Elliot and Leo had only been cutting through the garden on their way back to the dorm; they hadn't planned to stop there.

Should he wait here, or go on back to the dorm? After giving it a little thought, Elliot decided to wait for three minutes, but no more. Taking *Holy Knight* from where he'd been holding it under his arm, he flipped to the page marked with the bookmark Leo had given him.

"…Heh." He broke into a faint smile. Elliot picked up the bookmark with his fingertips:

"Y'know…"

It hadn't been his birthday or any other special day, and yet, out of the blue, he'd gotten a present.

A bookmark from Holy Knight, Elliot's favorite series.

Unlike Leo, who read most books cover-to-cover in one sitting, Elliot was the type who took time to read a book. Many books came with attached ribbons, so he'd never felt it was much of an inconvenience, but he had thought it would be nice to have a bookmark all his own.

He didn't remember if he'd ever mentioned that to Leo.

Either way…

"No, it's nothing like that. I just wanted you to have it."

I didn't think he was the sort of guy who could be that considerate…

He did think the way he'd given it to him—casually, brusquely, on the way back from the library—had been just like Leo.

"……Hmm."

Elliot let his eyes fall to the book, thinking he'd read a little further.

However, it felt as if he wouldn't be able to concentrate on what he read, so he replaced the bookmark and shut the book with a thump.

The sky was cloudy, and on top of that, the shadowed back garden was chilly. Elliot thought, *Yeah, I'm done. No more waiting*, and decided to leave the garden. As he was about to set off, he noticed that one of his shoes had come undone. Elliot crouched down and retied his shoelace.

Just then, something smacked him lightly on the back. Elliot turned.

"Man, Leo. That was fas—"

"Mew?"

A blank cat's face. Boy and feline gazed at each other.

……*A cat?!*

At the violent shock from this unexpected sight, Elliot lost his balance and almost fell over. Somehow managing to keep from falling, he stood up, staring at the cat.

It had a ribbon tied around its neck, so he knew it was probably somebody's pet. It was a pure white cat with striking, limpid, silver

eyes. Elliot complained, holding his galloping heart: “D-don’t scare me like that, cat.” The white cat only gave an entertained “Mew! ♪”

Elliot glanced right and left, but aside from himself and the white cat, the garden was empty.

“…Tch! What idiot brought you in here?”

“Mew, mew. Mew, mew.”

The white cat meowed, pestering him to play. Responding to its voice, Elliot met its gaze. He’d heard that cats ran when humans looked them in the eye, but the white cat must have been very used to humans; it didn’t even hint at trying to run.

Elliot’s face grew stern.

“No. That’s no good. Listen, if somebody finds you here, there’s going to be trouble.”

He was right: It was Discipline Reinforcement Week.

After school, students tended to let themselves go a bit, and the disciplinary committee went on patrol. Elliot had passed several committee members already. If they found the cat, they’d catch it, of course, and they’d begin hunting for its owner.

Elliot didn’t care what happened to the owner. However, even then, he thought it would be best to make them take the cat home right away.

If only for the cat’s sake.

“Where’s your owner, cat?”

In response to Elliot’s question, the white cat only tilted its head and mewed.

It looked up at Elliot with big, bright, round eyes.

It was staring straight at Elliot.

“……

Elliot was silent.

His cheek twitched.

“……M-man, I guess I’d better…”

With a slightly hoarse mutter, Elliot crouched down again, as low as he could.

He was trying to put himself on the cat’s eye level.

“Listen, you. It’s not safe for you to be messing around on campus. Get out. G’wan, get.”

He put out a hand to catch it by the neck, but the cat slipped out of reach.

However, it made no move to leave Elliot’s side. Not only that, it licked the hand Elliot had stretched out with its tiny tongue. The sensation that traced his fingertips was damp and soft and rough, all at once.

Lick, lick. Lick.

……!

Elliot was frozen in place, unable to pull his hand back.

He knew.

Of course he knew. This was no time to be playing with a cat. He was at school, and although there was no one around right now, Leo could return at any moment. Besides, there was no telling when another student might show up. A patrolling disciplinary committee member, for example.

If anybody saw him like this…

Yeah, this isn't—

Lick lick. Lick lick.

Lick lick. Lick lick.

With no idea what Elliot was feeling, the white cat licked his fingers all over. Elliot stared at it, as if he couldn't look away.

"What's your name, cat?"

His question was almost involuntary.

The white cat stopped licking for a moment, turned its face toward Elliot, stared at him intently, and gave a soft "Mew." There was no telling whether it was meant as a reply or not. It only looked straight at him with those silver eyes.

"They're like…the moon…"

Elliot murmured, as if talking to himself. As if in a dream.

The white cat began licking his fingers again. Its tongue finally reached the skin between his fingers, at the base, and it tickled so much that Elliot shivered. He scolded the cat, hastily: "Hey, no, quit…!" However, his voice was weak, as if he was delirious with fever.

And his face…

Lick lick lick, lick!

"Hey, you! That tickles! Ah-ha-ha!"

His face wore one of the best smiles ever.

When, unable to take it anymore, Elliot drew his hand back, the white cat jumped up onto his knees, as if it was chasing the hand.

Then it playfully tried to crawl inside his coat.

Elliot could feel the cat's fur and its soft body through the cloth, and he really couldn't take it. He knew. Of course he knew. If he let the cat mess with him like this, his clothes would get dirty, and if anyone happened to see him, he'd have no way to cover for himself.

He had to chase it out of his coat. He had to.

He knew this. —But.

"Mew mew, mew mew, mew mew, mew mew, mew mew, mew mew, mew mew, mew mew."

The cat played innocently.

Th-this little… What incredible cat power…!!

Elliot was astonished.

"Cat power" was cats' fearsome ability to make anyone they were

playing with happy, no matter what the person wanted or how much of a nuisance it was, and to drain their will and strength to resist. The source of this power was thought to lie, not only in their charming forms and expressions, but in their paw pads as well.

…Of course, the only one who thought this was Elliot.

"Heh heh! Hey, cut that out… 'Moon'!"

He'd gone and named someone else's cat. Already. He was utterly enchanted by it.

In the House of Nightray, a family of dog people, Elliot was the one and only universally acknowledged cat lover. …And a terrible pushover, at that.

If the cat had continued playing for another few seconds, the thought that this was school and that it was Discipline Reinforcement Week would have vanished completely from Elliot's brain, and he'd have been left utterly defenseless, body and soul. A smile that was just as adorable as the cat had already found its way onto his face.

—Then. Suddenly.

The cat jumped down from Elliot's knees.

Just as Elliot, his face still one big smile, was about to ask it what was wrong…

His sixth sense picked up on danger.

His sense of hearing, which had sharpened instantaneously, caught the sound of footsteps. They were still far away but getting closer, coming up behind him.

Leo…?!

Elliot's reaction was a sight to behold.

He stood and turned with a speed and sharpness that even someone assaulted by an assassin while they slept probably wouldn't have been able to match. The motion was so fast that it kicked up a fierce gust of wind.

In that brief moment, the smile vanished from Elliot's face, and his sharp expression returned. However, his heart was pounding away like an alarm bell. When he looked for the white cat out of the corner of his eye, it was already disappearing into the shadow of the flower bed.

Had he been spotted playing with the cat? No, there'd been a few moments between the point where the cat jumped off his knees and the point where he'd heard footsteps.

No one saw me— They can't have seen!

"……Oh! Elliot…kun?"

At the sound of his name, he turned his piercing gaze straight in the direction of the voice.

When he saw the person who was walking toward him, Elliot felt himself going cold inside. The alarm bell in his chest calmed down, and his gaze, which had been rather threatening, became a glare filled with clear annoyance.

…Ada Vessalius…!

Silently, in his mind, Elliot said the girl's name.

She was a daughter of the House of Vessalius, one of the four great dukedoms. Unlike the House of Nightray, Vessalius was a line of heroes that were showered with unadulterated glory and honor. Ada was in the sixth year at school, and Elliot's senior.

The houses of Vessalius and Nightray were often compared to light and shadow.

"Hate the Vessaliuses. Despise them. Revile them." His father's words rose in Elliot's heart.

Elliot had heard these words ever since he was small, and they were carved deeply into his heart.

…And so.

At school, where it wouldn't do to cause trouble, Elliot had avoided interacting with her to the best of his abilities. Fortunately, since they were in different years, this hadn't been hard. He'd only seen her a handful of times, at a distance, since he first entered the academy.

"Grrt…" Unconsciously, Elliot ground his teeth together.

Whether or not she'd noticed his attitude, Ada came right up to him, then stopped and fidgeted. She seemed tense. She also seemed rather shy.

Now there's a face without a care in the world, Elliot thought, coldly.

"Um, uh…"

Ada pretended to straighten her perfectly tidy uniform, looking bashful.

"Elliot-kun, isn't it? I, um, we haven't spoken before, but I—"

"Don't say my name like we're friends, Ada Vessalius."

He'd dropped the words on her like a ton of bricks, and the girl shrank back like a scolded child.

* * *

LATER, IN HIS ROOM IN THE BOYS' DORM.

"Hey, why's it gone?"

Elliot was flipping through the pages of *Holy Knight* again and again, then turning the book upside down and shaking it, when Leo returned.

On seeing Elliot, who was scowling in irritation, he looked perplexed.

"Why's what gone?"

"The bookmark. The one you gave me."

At Elliot's answer, Leo's expression changed to one of comprehension, and he came over. Peering down at the book in Elliot's hands, he asked, "You did have it in the book, right?" Elliot nodded silently. The

bookmark had been in the book, and he'd been carrying the book under his arm, so it was hard to imagine that the bookmark had fallen out.

…Which meant it shouldn't be gone. And yet.

Leo seemed to have thought the same thing. He cocked his head as if to say, *That's odd.*

"When was the last time you saw it?"

"Oh, it was…"

Elliot scanned his memory.

"I opened the book in the back garden while I was waiting for you… It was then."

"I see. Then it must've happened after that, while you were on your way back here. Did anything unusual happen?"

"Unusual… Ada Vessalius talked to me."

He spoke after a momentary silence, making no attempt to hide his bad mood. Leo gave a small, surprised, "Huh." He followed it with, "That *is* strange," but Elliot said nothing. He was remembering his exchange with Ada. Even though she'd been nervous, Ada had given him a gentle smile.

"Don't say my name like we're friends."

She'd spoken to him, and he'd rejected her sharply.

He didn't know whether Ada had understood why he'd been so harsh with her. However, even after having been rebuffed in that fashion, Ada hadn't immediately tried to leave.

She might have had something she wanted to ask… Something she wanted to talk about. As far as Elliot was concerned, though, he had nothing to discuss with a Vessalius. And so, as Ada stood her ground, fidgeting and looking as if she were searching for the right words, he said it:

"I'm waiting for somebody here. You're in the way. Get lost."

At Elliot's ruthless words, Ada had said, "Oh, um, well, I'll see you later, then, Elliot-kun." On that carefree note, wearing a smile that had probably taken everything she had to summon, she went back into the school building.

Did she take that attitude even though she knew about the discord between the House of Nightray and the House of Vessalius, and that they were on nothing resembling good terms? …Or did she act like that because she didn't know?

Either way, Elliot thought.

"That girl's about as sharp as a marble."

His mutter drew a "Hey" from Leo.

"You're talking about an upperclassman."

"Like I care?"

"Didn't you scold younger students for not respecting an upperclassman just last week?"

Leo spoke reprovingly. For a moment, Elliot saw red; he shot a glance

at him.

"That was different."

"Oh, so it doesn't matter when it's *you*. I didn't know you were the sort who could compartmentalize your head like that. I hear it's really convenient."

At that, Leo stepped away from Elliot. His tone had been indifferent, but he'd as good as said, *I know you really know better*. Elliot was exasperated by Leo's attitude, but he couldn't find a comeback.

"—And? Could you have dropped it then?"

Leo smoothly set the conversation back on track.

Elliot, feeling rather off-balance, searched his memory.

He hadn't been able to leave immediately, not after he'd run Ada off by telling her he was waiting for someone, so he'd dutifully stood there for a few minutes. When, as expected, Leo hadn't come back, he'd left the back garden and returned to the boys' dorm. If he'd dropped it then, there was no way he wouldn't have noticed.

"……No," he concluded briefly.

Leo folded his arms. "Hmmm…"

Elliot also looked as if he was thinking hard. However, at Leo's next, casual words, his expression froze.

"Anything else? Did something happen before or after that?"

Mew, mew.

"……'Moon'…"

He'd accidentally said the word aloud, and he shut his mouth hastily. Leo looked perplexed: "???"

"Moon? …Like the one in the sky, you mean??"

"Nuh, no, it's nothing. I didn't mean that…"

He didn't know what he should say.

When the white cat had appeared, and he'd messed around with it for a while…

It was true that, right then, he'd forgotten about the book. He'd been holding it under his elbow, and he wasn't entirely sure that he hadn't come pretty close to dropping it a few times. No, he thought he probably had. …But if he said that to Leo…

The things Leo would say…

Elliot's gaze swam. It would have been obvious to anyone that he was being evasive.

All he said was, "…I…might have dropped it."

"While you were playing with the cat?"

Leo's careless bombshell startled Elliot so much he thought his brain might boil over. His field of vision seemed to somersault.

He was confused, and upset, and his face was bright, bright red—

“Y-y-y-y-you jerk!! You were watching that, Leo?!”

He grabbed Leo’s shirtfront as violently as if he meant to hit him.

If he’d been seen, it would have been the blunder of a lifetime… No, much worse than that. If… If he’d been spotted enjoying himself that much, with his guard completely down…

He’d lose every last shred of his prestige as a master!

“Elliot, calm down.”

Moving nonchalantly, even though he was being shaken back and forth by the flustered Elliot, Leo dropped the corner of the book he was holding onto his master’s head. The motion was casual, but it had serious power behind it. Elliot yelped in pain, but it soon turned to anger; determined to give as good as he got, he glared fiercely at Leo and raised his fist.

Just as he did so—

“You’ve got animal hair on your uniform. It’s white, so it doesn’t stand out, but it’s there.”

At Leo’s words, Elliot froze.

“I didn’t see what happened, so the rest is inference. The hair is short, so it’s probably cat hair. If you think you might have dropped the bookmark then, you were probably playing so enthusiastically that you forgot about the book. …And it looks like I was right. You really are easy to read.”

“……Ngkl…”

“Ah, I made you say ‘uncle.’”

Leo sounded rather pleased.

Then he smacked his palm with a fist and said, “Oh, I see,” as if inspiration had just struck. With no idea what was going on, Elliot flinched. Leo—obviously entertained—spoke with the refreshed expression and tone of a detective who’d just solved a cold case:

“So ‘Moon’ is a name? Elliot. That cat. Did you—”

“Don’t say
iiii

AFTER SHE'D LEFT ELLIOT.

Ada was walking down one of the school corridors. Her shoulders drooped slightly.

"Elliot-kun……"

She murmured the name of the boy who'd chased her out of the back garden.

Elliot Nightray. He was a boy in a different school year, but Ada had known his name since he began attending the academy. After all, like Ada, he was a child of the four great dukedoms, and they were going to the same school. And, as had happened with her, his name had traveled throughout the school soon after he entered it.

Possibly because they were in different years, they'd never directly interacted before. As a result, she hadn't known what his personality was like.

However, she'd heard the girls in her class happily talking about how he'd helped them when they were in trouble, and this had created a diagram in Ada's mind: "Elliot-kun = Good person."

Since that was the case, although it had taken a little courage for her to speak to him for the first time, she hadn't been reluctant to do so.

"Haaah……"

Ada sighed. She hadn't expected to be refused so roughly.

Why? she wondered. She didn't understand.

But maybe—

Elliot had said he was waiting for someone. *"So get lost,"* he'd said.

Ordinarily, you wouldn't shoo away anyone else who happened to be in the area just because you were waiting for someone.

…Which meant…?

Place: A deserted back garden.

Person: Someone he didn't want to be seen meeting.

Meaning… He'd been embarrassed?

Could it be—?!

"A secret date…or something?"

As soon as she'd murmured it, Ada's cheeks flushed, and she gave a quiet little scream.

In that case, she thought, she really had put her foot in it.

Of course she'd been scolded. What terrible timing!

Time spent with a beloved someone was precious. In that situation, Ada wouldn't have wanted anyone to disturb her, either. As she walked down the corridor, Ada fancied she felt her chest growing warm. She hadn't spoken to Elliot today simply because he was also a child of the

four great dukedoms.

“He’s his……little brother—”

The face of a young man from the House of Nightray, a man whom Ada had recently begun to think of as someone special, rose in her mind’s eye.

That alone was enough to bring happiness bubbling up inside her.

“Hee-hee!” Ada had begun to scatter a girlish aura, a smile on her pretty lips. Then, spotting another disciplinary committee member walking up the corridor toward her, she gasped. It was a school patrol. The same task that had taken Ada to the back garden.

Oh no, she thought. It was entirely possible that some other committee member would go to the back garden, as she had.

She had to stop them.

She had to protect Elliot-kun’s secret date, his special time.

As someone else who was in love!

“

Leo only said, “Search me,” and looked perplexed.

At first he thought the white cat might have caused a disturbance, but a look at the students told him that wasn’t it.

“…It’s not here.”

Elliot casually looked around the garden, but, as expected, he didn’t see the cat. He peered into the shadows of the flower bed, too, but the cat hadn’t been heavy enough to leave decent footprints.

After a little while, the students who’d been in the back garden returned to the school building, looking puzzled. When they asked one of the students, they were told that somebody had been kicking up a fuss in the school about something-or-other in the back garden. It had sounded like something interesting was going on, so they’d come out to see, but there hadn’t been anything at all. What a letdown.

Elliot had no idea what it all meant. However, he was a bit irritated with whoever it was for having done something so uncalled for.

In the now-deserted back garden, Elliot knit his brow, wondering what to do.

“It may have gone off campus already,” Leo murmured. “…The cat.”

Feeling as if it was too late to hide anything at this point, Elliot had told him everything.

He’d been distracted by Ada’s approach, and all he’d managed to see of the white cat was its back.

It might have been holding the dropped bookmark in its mouth. He couldn’t think of anywhere else the bookmark could have gotten to. If the cat had left the school grounds, it was all over. His chances of getting that bookmark back were near zero.

Leo said absently, “Well, there’s no help for that. It wasn’t important, anyway. Let’s just forget about it.”

“……Like I could do that.”

Elliot’s answer was cross: It had been a present from Leo, and yet Leo didn’t seem bothered at all.

“Yeah, but it really, really wasn’t anything important, and—”

“Look! I’m responsible for losing it. Besides, you gave…!”

When he’d gone that far, he stopped.

There was no telling how Leo interpreted the words that hadn’t been said.

“In that case, I’ll help you look. Just until it gets dark. If we still haven’t found it by then, you give up, too.”

At those words, Elliot looked up at the sky.

It had been cloudy since morning, and even though it was still evening, it was already gloomy. Leo’s “until it gets dark” hadn’t been sarcastic. It had been a pragmatic decision: After it got dark, it would be very hard to search. Elliot had been planning to look for it by himself if he had to, but—

“…We’d better hurry,” he muttered, his voice low.

He bowed his head, looking at the ground, and thought. Even if they were only searching on campus, where would a cat go? Probably somewhere where people weren't likely to see it, which meant… As he racked his brains, Leo tugged at his sleeve.

"I'm thinking." He brushed Leo's hand off.

"—Say, Elliot. That cat was white, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"With a ribbon around its neck."

"Yeah."

As he answered absently, Elliot thought, *Did I tell him about the ribbon?*

"Then I see it. That's Moon."

At Leo's words, Elliot's face came up sharply. Leo was pointing at a corner of the back garden, and there was the white cat. It looked at Elliot and Leo and gave a soft mew. It didn't have the bookmark in its mouth. Elliot thought it might have hidden it somewhere.

In that case, they'd have to get it to lead them to it, no matter what.

"Elli—"

"Shh!"

Elliot cut Leo off, hushing him. He crouched down, putting himself on the cat's eye level. Although it had been incredibly friendly before, it must have sensed their desperation to catch it: The white cat stayed motionless, watching the two of them to see what they'd do.

Elliot beckoned to it with his fingers: *Here, kitty. C'mere.* But the white cat still didn't move.

"Do you think we could use this?"

Leo took a small candy drop from his pocket and held it out to Elliot. Elliot had no idea whether cats could eat candy, but the colorful wrapper might get its attention. He took it from Leo, held the end of the wrapper, and wiggled it back and forth so the cat would see it.

The effect was instantaneous.

Tup-tup-tup-tup! The cat came running up to him.

……Here it comes!

Elliot was nervous. He couldn't mess up. He had to reel it in with the candy and catch it, or else—

The white cat leapt at the candy.

Just before it connected, Elliot whisked the candy up high and out of the way, dodging the cat. The cat looked up at Elliot and mewed. It seemed disappointed.

Elliot felt a twinge in his chest. The white cat jumped again. Elliot moved his hand, evading. Jump, evade. Jump, evade. As this repeated over and over, Elliot felt an indescribable ticklish sensation.

"Too bad! I'm not letting you get it that easily, ah-ha-ha-ha!"

After he'd played with the cat for a while, Elliot said, "There!" and tossed the candy onto the ground.

As if it had been given a toy, the cat batted the candy around with its front paws and stepped on it lightly, pinning it down.

The little guy really is cute…

Elliot's eyes crinkled in a blissful smile.

Leo watched him, steadily.

"Huh?!" Registering Leo's significant gaze, Elliot came back to himself with a jolt.

Remembering his original goal, he hastily turned to Leo.

"No! You've got it all wrong, Leo. I'm just, uh, lulling the cat into getting careless, and then I'll—"

"……Elliot."

"I'm telling you, that isn't it—"

"The cat's getting away."

"

“Aaaaaaugh!”

Just then, they heard a muffled voice from inside the dorm.

The sound was faint, coming to them as it did through the wall of the building, but Elliot and Leo did hear it.

A scream? They looked at each other.

* * *

“Gerald?!”

When Elliot and Leo stepped into the dorm’s entry hall, they saw a student crumpled at the foot of the stairs.

It was Gerald, the prefect.

Elliot ran over to him. The boy was moaning, as if he was in pain. Calling his name, Elliot helped him sit up.

Leo glanced at the staircase that led to the second floor and murmured, “I wonder if he slipped.”

“No……” Gerald insisted; his voice was hoarse.

“No?” Leo cocked his head, perplexed.

“I was pushed… They pushed me down.”

“Somebody pushed you?” Elliot echoed.

If that was true, it was a bit too serious to qualify as a prank.

Apparently, Gerald had been pushed from the fifth step or so, fairly low on the stairs. Elliot and Leo had assumed he’d been pushed from the landing, and they felt this was a bit of an anticlimax. “But it really hurt!” Gerald stressed during his explanation.

True, he seemed to have gotten away with bruises this time, but if he’d hit the wrong place, his injuries could have been much worse. When Elliot asked if he’d seen the person who’d pushed him, Gerald shook his head in frustration. Apparently he’d been pushed suddenly from behind, so he hadn’t seen.

“What kind of jerk would pull a stunt like that?” Elliot spit out.

“Mm.” Leo nodded in agreement.

“…It was…probably this guy.”

Gerald took a folded scrap of paper from his breast pocket. It looked as if it had been torn from one of the notebooks used in class. When Elliot took it and opened it, he saw a message written in an intentionally clumsy hand:

Resign from being prefect

“What’s this…?” Elliot looked puzzled.

Gerald said that it had been slipped under the door to his room a few days ago.

Looking down at what Elliot held, Leo muttered, “Could be a threatening letter…” If the words were taken at face value, then the sender of the note was someone who couldn’t stand to see Gerald in the

prefect's seat and refused to allow it. Just as Elliot was wondering who that would be, Gerald spoke with obvious hatred:

"It's Marcel."

Elliot narrowed his eyes sharply. Leo looked thoughtful.

"It's got to be him," Gerald declared categorically.

Gerald thought it would make sense if Marcel was the culprit. He imagined Marcel had a motive… That he wanted to damage Gerald.

Malice, enmity, or…revenge?

In which case…

"…Gerald, you…"

As he questioned Gerald, all concern was gone from Elliot's voice.

Even as he flinched a little bit at that voice, Gerald glared back aggressively, as if determined not to seem weak in front of a younger student. "What?!"

Elliot continued. "About Marcel. Did you—"

Just as he was about to check what he'd heard last week from Leo, it happened. He heard tiny footsteps: *Tup-tup-tup*.

They were coming from near the door to the entry hall. Elliot started, turning to look at the door, and there was the white cat.

In its mouth it held, not the candy, but the bookmark. A second later, Leo noticed it, too: "Oh."

The white cat slipped out through the crack in the door.

"…Suh…"

Elliot stared at the door, his shoulders trembling.

"Sorry, gotta go

forgive you.

"*For Marcel*," he said, and Gerald's expression went tight.

"Not with his personality. And…if Elliot won't forgive you, neither will I."

His voice was matter-of-fact, but Gerald shuddered, and his face went ashen.

Under that shaggy hair of his, Leo smiled a smile that went no farther than his lips.

"Remember that, *senpai*."

Blue Rose Club

THREE YEARS AGO, AFTER
SCHOOL ONE RAINY DAY.

Josephine had left her dormitory to buy some tea leaves. As she was walking down the avenue, she caught sight of Elliot Nightray standing in an alley, holding an umbrella.

She was in the third year at the time, and Elliot was two years below her, but she knew about him: As a child of one of the four great dukedoms, he'd been famous ever since he entered the academy. However, she'd never seen him be particularly friendly with anyone.

Figuratively speaking, at school, he was like a rose blooming among wildflowers. His splendor made him stand out, but his thorns made it impossible to get close to him… That type.

However, that morning had been a bit different. Josephine hadn't been there herself, so she didn't know the details. She'd heard from a friend that he'd started a fistfight in class. She'd thought it was unusual for him to get involved with anyone that way, but apparently a student who was studying in the same classroom had said something disparaging about his family.

Although they were children of the aristocracy, the first-years really were still children. No doubt some of them were ignorant of the ways of the world and didn't know their place.

From what she'd been told, the fight had been nearly one-sided in Elliot's favor: He'd knocked his opponent down, and that had been that. Josephine had only ever seen him being quiet, and it was difficult for her to imagine, but apparently he'd fought ferociously.

What in the world had the offending student said to set him off that way? She couldn't imagine.

However— With this, she thought, his isolation at school was bound to grow even deeper.

"Elliot Nightray…"

As he stood there, in the alley, Josephine quietly spoke his name. She wondered what he was doing. Elliot was facing the alley wall, and his

expression was blank and cold; she couldn't read any emotion in it. At his feet sat a small wooden crate.

Hearing a "mew" from the box, Josephine murmured, "An abandoned cat…?"

A cat, abandoned in the rain.

Elliot seemed to be looking at it from under his umbrella.

Involuntarily, Josephine held her breath, gazing intently at the scene. She didn't realize that her heart had begun to beat just a little faster.

Before long, Elliot reached into the crate and picked up the cat. He hugged it to his chest. Since he was holding the umbrella in one hand, he seemed to have a little trouble holding the cat, and she thought he was probably getting his clothes wet, but he didn't seem to care.

Ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp ba-dmp.

Josephine's heart was beating fast.

Not realizing he was being watched, Elliot's face abruptly softened. — *Heh.*

It was a gentle expression he'd never shown at school.

His lips moved, very slightly, as though he was talking to the cat.

You're just like me, aren't you?

There was no knowing whether Elliot had really said that.

In fact, he probably hadn't.

Still, that was what Josephine had heard. Like glad tidings from heaven. A portrait of a juvenile delinquent (or, no, Elliot Nightray), with a sad little smile on his lips, confiding the loneliness he couldn't discuss with anyone to an abandoned cat.

Josephine felt a poignant twinge, deep in her heart.

It wasn't love. It was more like…admiration for something exalted.

Finally, Elliot returned the cat to the crate.

Setting his umbrella over it so that the cat wouldn't get any wetter, he ran away down the alley, not caring that he was getting wet himself. He ran as if he was trying to shake off a lingering regret. The Lutwidge Academy dormitories didn't allow pets. There was no way he'd be able to take care of it.

Looking into the depths of the alley where Elliot had disappeared, Josephine murmured.

She murmured to the figure that seemed burned into her eyelids. That shape like a flower blooming nobly in the shadows.

"Master……Blue Rose…"

That was it.

The historic incident that became the beginning of the Blue Rose Club.

* * *

"…phine-sama? Josephine-sama."

Hearing her name called repeatedly, she returned from where she'd been wandering in memory. The common room on the third floor of the girls' dorm. The members of the Blue Rose Club were already assembled there. Josephine, who was a prefect, had used her authority to borrow the room temporarily.

A low glass table sat in the center of the room, with sofas arranged around it in a hollow square.

The table held steaming teacups and a plateful of cookies for light refreshment.

Everything was ready.

"Everyone has arrived, I see. All right. Let's begin."

Smiling, Josephine opened the meeting.

"Yes, let's," responded ladylike voices, but one girl looked perplexed:

"Why are we meeting here today?"

At the question, Josephine glanced at Matilda, who was sitting quietly in a corner seat.

"Because today's assembly is a rather special one."

At the word "special," a slight stir ruffled the elegant atmosphere. Every face held great expectations. However, Josephine was perfectly composed. The special report—the main dish—must be presented at the proper time.

When Josephine prefaced her remarks with the statement that the news would be revealed last, all the girls looked disappointed.

"Now then. Who will go first…?"

As Josephine looked around, a hand shot up energetically from a seat on the sofa.

"Yes! Um! I'd like to, if I may!"

"Heh-heh, yes, Mia-san. Go ahead."

Encouraged, the girl called Mia bounced up from the sofa.

She was the only first-year member of the Blue Rose Club, and the newest member of the group. She was a little flighty and tended to chase after anything popular, and this sometimes made her stand out uncomfortably; however, the older students thought of her as a sort of pet and were quite fond of her.

"You have a report, Mia-san?"

"That hasn't happened in ages."

In the midst of these and similar comments, Mia puffed out her chest proudly.

"I've found something fantastic."

Something fantastic? Josephine tilted her head, perplexed. *Yes*, Mia nodded enthusiastically; she reached into a paper bag she'd set on the floor, rummaged around in it, then pulled something out. For a moment,

nobody knew what it was. The first to identify it was Josephine.

"Is it a blue…bookmark?"

"Yes! Everyone knows, right? About the bookmark in the book Master Blue Rose was reading today, I mean. This is just like that one!"

As Mia held up the leather bookmark triumphantly, cries of "My!" rose up.

"I guess it's fairly rare; it was rather difficult to find. Still, I managed to buy it!"

"That's…something Master Blue Rose received from 'the other' and uses with great care…"

The girls gazed at it with envious eyes. Words of praise were on all their lips.

"That's quite marvelously rare."

"The very best, I should say."

"Ahhhh, would that I had one."

"Truly."

"Truly."

"Truly."

"But they're quite difficult to find, aren't they?"

In response to the group's voices, Mia shook her head happily—"No, no"—and reached into the bag on the floor once more. Then she pulled her hand out again, quickly. The girls' eyes were drawn to that hand. It held several bookmarks. "My, my, *my!*" Several cries of astonishment went up.

"'Sharing happiness under the auspices of Master Blue Rose'… Is that not what the Blue Rose Club is?!"

Even though she was the youngest member, Mia stated the club's founding principle eloquently, drawing admiring applause.

Mia began handing bookmarks to each member. The bookmarks didn't look cheap, and several voices wondered if they hadn't been quite expensive, but Mia answered cheerfully: "Please don't worry about it." As the bookmarks made their way around, one of the girls who held one suggested that if everyone had one, it might be nice to make the bookmark a symbol of membership.

No one objected. Josephine herself agreed that it was a good idea.

It was unanimous. Mia seemed deeply moved that the bookmarks she'd provided were being treated this way.

"—The Blue Rose Emblem."

Matilda, sitting in the corner, murmured it quietly, and everyone approved of the name as well. Some gazed at their bookmarks in delight, while others hid theirs away in their breast pockets, and still others shut theirs in the volumes of poetry they'd brought with them. The atmosphere in the common room had never been so scintillating.

Watching the scene with a smile of satisfaction, Josephine urged them on: "All right, does anyone else have any news?"

A voice spoke from nowhere in particular.

“Now that you mention it…” said the slightly perplexed voice.

“I hear Master Blue Rose was sighted running around the school today—”

Elliot Nightray

It was a good thing he’d left Leo in the dorm’s entrance hall, Elliot thought.

He was running full tilt, chasing after the white cat, which still had the bookmark in its mouth. In contests of pure physical strength, Elliot outmatched Leo, thanks to his swordsmanship training. If he’d brought Leo along, he was sure they would have lost sight of the cat long ago.

The white cat was agile, and on top of that, it ran easily through places that weren’t well suited to human runners. Of course Elliot chased it, along the tops of walls and over storehouse roofs.

When the white cat ran into a space between two buildings that was too narrow for Elliot, he’d run around to the other side and wait for it. However, maddeningly, he wasn’t able to catch it. By this time, he had no idea where on campus he’d run. Finally, the white cat veered off the path and dove into the bushes.

“……You’re n—……”

He tried to say it aloud, and almost choked.

You’re not getting away

"Oh, Elliot-kun—"

A voice spoke behind him. Ada Vessalius's voice.

Elliot turned; his gaze was sharp enough to cut. "Ahn?" Ada looked as if she'd just reached the back garden herself. Seeing Elliot suddenly plunge out of the bushes had obviously startled her. The sight of Elliot—out of breath, shoulders heaving—seemed to bewilder her.

Wearing an expression that declared she had absolutely no idea what was going on, she pointed at the bushes from which Elliot had emerged:

"Elliot-kun, did you just…come from there—?"

As she spoke, Ada seemed to come to some realization. Her cheeks suddenly flushed red.

Very softly, her lips mouthed the words "Secret date…" Ada looked down, folding her hands in front of her, fidgeting with her fingers.

Elliot didn't know what her reaction meant, and he had something far more urgent to worry about. Irritated, he glanced around the area.

Fidget fidget, fidget fidget. As Ada fidgeted, she spoke:

"……Ah. Um. Lutwidge Academy doesn't prohibit students from seeing each other, but, um, you really shouldn't, um… Not in the bushes… Um, that…that sort of…i-immoral buh…behavior isn't something I can allow as a disciplinary committee member, so to speak—Aaaaaaaaauau!"

Ada was in full confusion mode; her eyes were spinning.

"……What are you talking about?"

Elliot's face was cold.

"Huh?"

Ada looked blank. With a merciless sneer, Elliot spoke:

"Hah! So the Vessalius girl's head is always full of flower fields. It must be real nice to have things that easy. I don't care if you play disciplinary committee member, but at least do a decent job. Thanks to you, I've been……!"

If the disciplinary committee had found the white cat promptly and caught it before it met Elliot…

This wouldn't even be happening!

His logic was pure misdirected anger, but Elliot had a sharp tongue. He couldn't possibly have been more irritated. Even as she shrank back a bit under his harsh words, Ada echoed the end of Elliot's sentence: "Thanks to me, you've been—?"

Elliot had no intention of telling her, and he couldn't have done so in any case.

"…Elliot-kun?"

"I told you, don't say my—"

Name like we're friends, Elliot was about to say.

But.

—Moon?!

Behind Ada's back, he saw the white cat slip smoothly into the school building.

Puzzled, Ada was still waiting for the words that came after "don't say my," and when Elliot suddenly made a mad dash at her, she gave a little shriek and almost fell over. However, Elliot didn't even seem to see her anymore; he ran right past her and away.

"Elliot-kun…?!"

On reflex, Ada called for him to stop. However, without turning back, Elliot yelled at her over his shoulder and disappeared into the school building.

"Don't let me see your face again, you addlepated disciplinary committee member!"

It was magnificently trenchant abuse. …And then Ada was left all alone.

Under the cloudy sky. Standing dumbfounded in a cold wind that was beginning to carry hints of the chill of night, she repeated:

"'Addlepated'…"

Why had he said that to her? She worried a bit, but before long, she understood.

Oh, I see! Elliot-kun was—

Ada Vessalius

Back inside the school building, Ada strode enthusiastically down the corridor.

She was raring to go, and she exuded an imposing aura that said "Discipline must be maintained!" That said, she hadn't discarded her usual soft, benevolent atmosphere, which meant something about her felt undeniably mismatched. Still, Ada herself was attempting to seem as strict as she possibly could.

Elliot-kun cheered me on. "Do a decent job," he said. I've got to do my best!

She'd looked out into the back garden a little while ago because she'd been worried about Elliot and the someone he was waiting for. She'd tried to arrange it so that people wouldn't go to the back garden, but she wasn't sure it had worked. Were they having a wonderful time, undisturbed?

I wonder what sort of person Elliot-kun was waiting for…

That curiosity had also been there, in a corner of her mind.

He must have seen through it. That was why he'd scolded her so harshly.

"I don't care if you play disciplinary committee member, but at least do a decent job.

"Don't let me see your face again (until you finish your job)!"

She was sure that was what he'd meant.

In that case, she thought, after she'd fully performed her duties as a disciplinary committee member, she'd go to see him again, and she'd greet him properly this time. She was positive he'd return her greeting then. …After all, she was sure he was a good person. No doubt they could become friends.

Although she wasn't aware of it, it was more that Ada wanted to believe this than that she actually did believe it.

And so, first of all, she'd perform her disciplinary committee duties properly—

As she was thinking this and similar things, she turned a corner in the corridor and came face-to-face with Elliot again. Elliot was running without looking where he was going, and they very nearly collided.

"Waugh!" Their voices overlapped.

I'm sorry, Elliot was about to apologize, when he realized it was Ada.

"You?!"

"Wa-wa-wa, I didn't meet you, I haven't seen you, I—"

"……Huh? Dammit, whatever, just *move*!"

She'd thought she'd be scolded again, but Elliot only pushed her out of the way and ran off, without taking the time to yell at her. He was looking this way and that, and he wasn't watching where he was going. Ada tilted her head, puzzled. What had happened to the secret date? Was it over?

No, that wasn't it. She remembered their exchange in the back garden.

"What are you talking about?" As he'd responded to Ada's unfounded suspicions, Elliot's face and voice had been cold.

From what she could tell from her memories, that had been an honest reaction.

In that case, her idea about a secret date might have been mistaken. In that case, what was he doing? He'd seemed to be looking for something. If he was, in fact, looking for something, she wanted to help him. …She *did* want to, but Ada shook her head, erasing the thought.

I have to perform my own duties properly.

He was kind enough to scold me, after all. He wouldn't want me to set aside my work as a disciplinary committee member to help him. I'll do my best at my own job.

Right! Ada thought, firing herself up again, and began to walk faster.

And then.

Everywhere she went, Ada ran into Elliot.

She ran into him in a deserted classroom, peering under the teacher's desk. When he saw Ada, Elliot started, sent a sharp glance her way, and

went off somewhere.

She ran into him outside the bathrooms. Unless she'd been imagining things, Elliot had just emerged from the girls' lavatory. As before, when Elliot noticed Ada, he was startled, but this time he ignored her and ran off.

The next place she saw him was outside another restroom. She began to worry that his stomach might be troubling him—But, again, Elliot saw Ada, started, glared at her fiercely, and ran off.

She ran into him in the cafeteria, where preparations for the evening meal were being made. She ran into him in the chapel. And in the music room. And in the reference room. She ran into him everywhere. Every time they met, Elliot started, and every time, he seemed to have grown more tired.

Finally, as Ada was passing by the main gate, there was Elliot again—

The instant he met her eyes:

"…You…!"

This time, Elliot didn't ignore her. He strode up to her, as if he couldn't take it anymore.

"Uh, um…"

Overawed, Ada wondered whether she should encourage him with a *You're working very hard, aren't you!*

Elliot said, "What are you, a stalker?! Are you following me or something?!"

"N-n-n-no! No, that isn't it!"

At the unexpected accusation, Ada explained in a panic.

She told him she was only patrolling the school in order to properly carry out her responsibilities as a member of the disciplinary committee. Elliot just happened to be wherever she went, and she hadn't meant to startle him or get in his way. Of course, she said, it was perfectly all right for him to ignore her completely.

Ada spoke emphatically, seriously, earnestly, with an expression of utmost sincerity on her face.

"…Oh, yeah…?"

Even as he listened, Elliot's brow was twitching. He seemed to be getting more and more irritated.

At last, when he'd heard her out, Elliot said:

"Ada Vessalius. You, you…"

Calling to Ada in a very low voice, glaring at her with dangerous eyes, he jabbed his index finger straight out at her in accusation:

"*You*—have *rotten timing*!!"

"……I-I'm sor…ry…?"

Bewildered by his intensity, all Ada could do was apologize.

“Aaah, dammit!”

Elliot spat the words out, kicked the ground lightly with his toe, and turned his face from Ada.

“I don’t have time for this. I’ve got to find it fast, or else—”

With that, he ran off. Left alone once again, Ada murmured, “So he *is* looking for something…” What could it be? If she knew that, she might be able to find it for him while she was out on patrol.

I wonder what Elliot-kun could be looking for so desperately…?

She was sure it must be something terribly important.

Gerald

Petty weeds can be withered at any time

When, after his fall on the stairs, Gerald dragged his aching body back to his own room, he found that another slip of paper had been pushed under his door. Gerald read its contents, then immediately crushed it in his hand and pressed the hand that gripped the paper to his forehead.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit…”

The message was written in an intentionally bad hand, just like the warning to resign from being prefect.

The “weeds” were probably him. And the “can be withered at any time”…

When he’d been pushed down the stairs, they’d gone easy on him, but if they felt like it…

At any time…they could…?

Did it mean they could kill him?

For an instant, he shuddered. Then anger welled up.

“That little creep Marcel…”

He said the name as if he were squeezing it out between his clenched teeth.

As a prefect, he was doing a good job. The only one he could think of who would harbor malice toward him was his assistant Marcel, who’d realized that he was secretly issuing orders to the younger students.

Prefects were expected to abide by even stricter rules than the other students, so that they could serve as models for them and give them guidance. Gerald’s treatment of Marcel had been a way to slightly relieve the pressure of his constricting life at school.

He hadn’t considered it as anything more. He’d even thought of himself as toughening up the effeminate Marcel. Educating him.

And even so.

“…That little rat!”

Gerald struck the door violently.

“I’ll find out for sure,” he muttered. Although he was convinced, he

had no positive proof that Marcel was the culprit. In that case, he'd interrogate the boy himself and make him confess. Once he'd confessed, he'd hurt him so badly he'd never be able to bare his fangs at him again, and that would be that.

That was all it would take.

Gerald stepped away from the door to his room and began walking down the corridor.

Then. Suddenly.

"Elliot isn't likely to forgive you.

"If Elliot won't forgive you, neither will I.

"Remember that, senpai.*"*

The words Leo had said to him in the first-floor entry hall rose in his mind. Since Elliot was a son of the House of Nightray, Gerald couldn't help but be aware of him, but up until now, he'd barely even noticed his valet Leo.

Not only that, if the spacey underclassman hadn't been Elliot's valet, Gerald might have used him as a target to burn off stress instead of Marcel. He hadn't thought of him as anything more than that.

However.

"Remember that, senpai.*"*

The instant he'd heard those words, a strange chill had raced through his entire body. Leo's tone had been peaceful, and the expression hidden behind his hair had been a sunny smile. …And yet Gerald had felt as if he'd had a knife…no, fangs, pressed to his throat.

What had that sensation been? No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't understand it.

It had been all in his head; he'd been shaken by his fall down the stairs. Forcing himself to think that, Gerald chased Leo's words from his mind.

He set off for the large room where Marcel lived.

Elliot Nightray

…There it is…!

As he was running all over the school grounds, Elliot spotted the white cat in the maple grove. As soon as the cat noticed Elliot, it turned tail and ran deeper into the trees.

"Wa…WAaaaaaaaaaaaaAIT UuuuuuuuuP YOOooooooooooooo!!"

With enough force to completely use up his remaining strength, Elliot launched into a furious sprint…

…Trailing the end of his yell behind him.

"ooooooooooooooooooooooouuu—!!"

Ahead of him, the white cat leapt and ran, as lightly as if it were dancing. In contrast, the two words "Catch It" had risen in Elliot's

glittering eyes. The spell "Catch-it-catch-it-catch-it-catch-it" was monopolizing his entire brain.

The sky was getting darker and darker. If he lost sight of the cat again, that would be that. He was going to catch it, no matter what. He was absolutely, positively going to catch it.

Elliot had become a hunting dog completely controlled by the thought "catch it."

…Maybe that was why.

Ahead of him, the grove ended, and as his field of vision opened up, he saw a building. When the white cat went through the back door and into the building, Elliot ran in after it without a moment's hesitation.

Chasing the white cat, he dashed down the straight corridor that led from the back door. Before long, the corridor turned left, and he saw a stairway leading up to the second floor. When it came even with the beginning of the stairs, the white cat changed directions with a bound and began to run up them. Like a gale, Elliot rushed up the steps as well.

Taking the stairs three at a time, he followed the white cat into a corridor where the candles had been lit and kept on running. Ahead of him, a bend in the corridor was drawing closer. The distance between him and the white cat was shrinking.

It's mine! Elliot thought.

Then, from around the bend, still out of sight:

"Ahh, that bath felt wonderful."

"It's nice to go in before dinner, isn't it?"

"By the way, dear, your bust has grown again."

…He heard voices in conversation.

Coming back to himself as if he'd been struck by lightning, Elliot involuntarily opened the nearest door and dived in sideways. He rolled over and over on the floor, then got right back up, ran to the door, and shut it.

He was in some room somewhere. The room was completely deserted and nearly empty, with only a few wooden crates stacked in a corner.

After a bath?

Busts growing?

It was the sort of girls' conversation that was never heard in the school building. Confused as he was, Elliot held his breath.

Several voices and sets of footsteps were coming closer.

"…Hmm? Did you hear something just now?"

"Did you? I didn't hear a thing…"

"It must have been your imagination."

Ba-dmp ba-dmp. His heart was thudding away. He was afraid they might hear it through the door.

"Oh, the underthings I bought the other day are marvelous."

"They *are* a bit too bold, though, don't you think?"

The voices passed by the door and receded.

Involuntarily turning red at the candid conversation, Elliot held very still. Silence filled both the corridor and the room. As he worked to get his ragged breathing under control, he thought desperately. He'd been so focused on chasing the white cat that he hadn't even considered what the building he'd run into might be.

But.

Just maybe.

It couldn't be.

What if.

"I-is this place—" Elliot muttered. His voice was trembling.

And then:

"The girls' dorm."

Abruptly, a voice spoke right by his ear, startling Elliot so much that he jumped. When he whipped around toward the voice, his forehead struck another forehead that was right next to him. Sparks filled his vision. When he managed to look, his eyes misting, the person who stood there was…Leo.

"You! Le—… Mmph!"

Elliot had been about to yell, but Leo clamped a hand over his mouth. He put the index finger of his other hand to his lips and whispered, "Shh.

"I was walking around looking for you, and I saw you in the grove. When I followed you, you dashed straight in here. That was a shock. Right into the girls' dorm. Do you know what's going to happen if anybody sees you in a place like this? You do know, don't you?"

"Ugkh." Elliot could only groan.

The Lutwidge Academy girls' dormitory.

It was sacred territory, completely forbidden to boys. It was said that a horrible punishment awaited any boy who broke that taboo. No, worse than the official punishment, worse than anything: If word that "*The* Elliot Nightray sneaked into the girls' dorm!" were to spread, what would happen to Elliot's life at school?

A murky image rose in his mind.

No matter where Elliot went, in the halls at school or in the courtyard, the students around him would whisper:

"Oh! That's Elliot-kun!"

"You're right, it's Elliot Nightray!"

"Elliot Nightray, son of the House of Nightray, one of the four great dukedoms!"

"Elliot Nightray-kun, son of the House of Nightray, one of the four great dukedoms, who sneaked into the girls' dormitory and tried to peep~!"

*Aaaa

“Fugah!” With a weird yelp, Elliot seemed to regain a bit of his sanity.

Breathing hard, he glanced at Leo.

“W-we’ve got to get out of here fast, or else—”

When he’d gotten that far, he realized that something was odd. He’d leapt into the room, closing the door himself.

When he’d entered the room, it had been empty.

Even as he thought this wasn’t the time to be talking about things like that, Elliot had to ask.

“Leo, how did you get in here?”

“Huh? I already told you. I saw you go into the girls’ dorm like a savage beast—”

“‘Like a savage beast’ is uncalled for…and that’s not what I meant!”

Elliot glanced at the room’s window.

From there? No, he was dimly aware that this was the third floor. That wasn’t plausible.

Seeming to pick up on Elliot’s question from his gesture, Leo answered:

“Oh, that.”

In a casual motion, he pointed at the wall. It was just a blank, undecorated wall.

“The wall?” Elliot looked dubious.

“It’s been a long time, but I read a book about the school’s history once. It said that the Lutwidge Academy school building and dorms weren’t originally built to be a school and dorms; they were used for… all sorts of other things. And so there are hidden rooms in them—and hidden passages.”

“You mean…”

“Right. Narrow spaces in the walls between rooms, so that you can get outside without anyone noticing. What was I reading…? I think it was a pretty rare banned book—”

He didn’t care about the circumstances surrounding the book. He was just grateful for Leo’s voracious reading habits. However, begrudging even the time it would take to whoop with delight, Elliot leaned close to Leo, urging him on in a whisper:

“Great! We’ll get out that way, then. Hurry, Leo!”

Finding himself caught by the shoulders and pestered, Leo said, “Okay, okay,” sounding rather disgusted. He crossed to the wall. Just to be on the safe side, Elliot flattened himself against the door, trying to monitor what was happening in the corridor outside. Far away, he could hear footsteps approaching the room. His heart gave a nervous leap.

Leo was patting down the wall. Elliot glanced at Leo and urged him on in a very small voice. “Step it up!” But Leo was touching the wall here and there, then tilting his head in perplexity. Finally, he turned back to Elliot, crossing his arms over his head in an *X*.

Then, in the same very small voice as Elliot, he said:

"It's no good. It's old, and it looks like it broke. The mechanism in the wall won't move."

Whaaaaaaaat?! Elliot screamed, silently.

Even as they spoke, the footsteps traveling down the corridor arrived in front of the room. On reflex, Elliot held the doorknob. His heart was pounding fit to explode. Cold sweat trickled down his forehead. And the footsteps…went straight past the room, without stopping. They receded again.

When he couldn't hear the footsteps anymore and silence had returned, Elliot went limp, collapsing to his knees.

No matter how many lives he had, he thought, it wouldn't be enough to get him through a crisis like this one.

He looked at Leo with eyes that were growing dim from accumulated fatigue. Leo was gazing vaguely up at the ceiling; there was no telling what he was thinking. He called to him—"Leo"—but there was no response. Leo was a bit like this when he was absorbed in a book. Deciding he couldn't count on him, Elliot thought.

We'll just have to risk it and go back the way I came in!

Just as Elliot resigned himself to that tragic idea, Leo murmured:

"I guess it really was that. That banned book."

Leo brought his eyes down from the ceiling and looked at Elliot.

"I only read it once and it's been years, so I don't remember it all that well, but I may be able to find another secret passage."

"…Seriously?"

"The only one I was sure about was the one I came in by, so… It'll be a gamble. What do you want to do?" Leo asked, looking Elliot straight in the eye.

Elliot looked back, silently. Leo's expression was hidden behind his shaggy hair and glasses, and on top of that, the room was dim, so he couldn't read his face. However, even without looking directly, Elliot knew his valet's expression as if it were his own. He knew, and it made him want to smile wryly.

You know it's—

Even in this, a situation that was, in a way, the biggest crisis of their lives.

You know it's just his usual smug look.

Leo was waiting quietly for Elliot to speak. "Okay," Elliot said, firming his resolve.

"It's all up to you. Do it, Leo."

At that, Leo's expression softened slightly, and he spoke with a simple, genuine smile:

"—Understood, Master."

Now this is a bit of a problem…

Josephine sighed, quietly. The Blue Rose Club members' enthusiasm was dragging on longer than expected. The common room on the third floor of the girls' dorm was filled with cheerful voices, and the conversation showed no signs of dying down. The dinner hour was drawing near.

She hadn't thought the topic of Master Blue Rose running around the school would expand this far.

It had begun with Mia's fantasy.

"I've been thinking! Might not Master Blue Rose be secretly fighting against suspicious persons who are attempting to infiltrate the academy?! Wouldn't that suit him?! Master Blue Rose doesn't make close friends because he is kind and does not want to involve them in his battle. If so, he might have been running around the school in pursuit of a villain he hadn't quite managed to defeat… Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

It was a childish bit of make-believe, and quite like Mia.

She'd fully expected the other girls to simply giggle and let it pass without comment. However, after Mia, another girl spoke up.

She seemed a bit embarrassed, as if she were confessing an unrequited love.

"I-in that case, I've also imagined something. There was a report that Master Blue Rose had a coughing fit while practicing with his sword in the grove, alone… Last month, wasn't it? It gave me an idea. Suppose Master Blue Rose is afflicted with an incurable disease and is suffering? And then, every night in the dormitory, 'the other' nurses him tenderly."

At once, delighted cries of "Ooooooooh!" went up.

"That is first-rate."

"I think the contrast with his strength of will is exquisite."

"Yes, it's too, too wonderful."

"L-listen, my dear, about that incurable illness—"

"A secret known only to Master Blue Rose and 'the other,' of course."

"Of course it is!"

"Of course it is!"

"Of course it is!"

The girls squealed and giggled noisily.

Their excitement was so great that requests for more tea came one after another.

Then another girl spoke, enthusiastically:

"Would you listen to my story, then, too?"

…And a third fantasy began.

This game was both sweet and dangerous: Unlike real reports, they would never run out of material. When the third tale ended, a fourth girl began to speak.

After her came a fifth, then a sixth, and a seventh… Once they had begun, some girls regaled them with several fantasies. Josephine listened. On the surface, she was smiling calmly.

"…And then, you see. I've thought of a different development for that yawn which we spoke of earlier. It's possible that Master Blue Rose really doesn't sleep at night. You see, although there is no way for us to know, a secret banquet is held in the boys' dormitory every night, and Master Blue Rose presides over it as king of the night—"

How many stories had there been? She'd lost track of where in the series this girl, the one who'd stood up from the sofa and was telling her tale in clear accents, belonged.

Then, finally, the girl noticed that, although she was smiling gently, Josephine had been silent the whole time. Matilda, seated in the corner, was silent as well, but this was usual for her, and no one paid any attention to it.

"Y-yes, that's right."

The girl gracefully resumed her seat on the sofa and stretched out a hand toward Josephine.

"I'd love to hear your story next, Josephine-sama."

At that, as if they'd just remembered, the girls' eyes turned to Josephine, and voice after expectant voice spoke: "That's right." "Yes." "Please do, Josephine-sama." *My!* Josephine put a hand to her lips, smiling coolly.

"But we've spent so much time already… Would anyone mind if we moved on to the main topic at this point?"

At her words, all the girls' expressions changed: *We forgot!*

……To be honest, I'd like to relate my Master Blue Rose fantasies, too! I'd like to… But!

Gracefully, without letting these fierce emotions show on the surface, Josephine looked around the circle of members.

Then—austerely, elegantly—she began to speak.

"The time has come to reveal the full content of Project Coronation to you."

"…Project Coronation?" The girls echoed her words, puzzled.

"Yes," Josephine said, smiling proudly.

"It is a project I myself and Matilda over there have been carrying out for Master Blue Rose's sake. I trust you're all aware of the vote that was held—secretly, yet on a grand scale—among the girls last month? 'Sparkle! The First Ranking of Boys Most Suited to be Prefect.' The boy who triumphed over the current prefects for the glorious first-place spot was our Master Blue Rose."

It was true. Although it didn't show publically, Master Blue Rose was quite popular, not only with the Blue Rose Club, but with the entire female student population of Lutwidge Academy.

A startling number of girls secretly carried photographs of Master

Blue Rose in their student pocketbooks and notebooks.

His popularity with the older students, girls in the fifth and sixth years, was particularly great. Unlike the male students, to the female students, even the shadow he carried as a member of the House of Nightray was no more than a spice that enhanced his fascination.

"As you see, then, this dream belongs, not only to the Blue Rose Club, but to the entire female student body. Prefect is a glorious position granted only to students chosen by this academy. We will do away with Gerald, a prefect unfit for the position, and install our own Master Blue Rose—"

Just as Josephine said those words.

At the phrase "do away with," the girls gave anxious cries of "My…," and immediately afterward—

BAM! The door to the common room flew open as if someone had kicked their way through it.

Elliot Nightray

A SHORT WHILE EARLIER.

Having entrusted their escape from the girls' dorm to Leo, Elliot left the room with him. With Leo in the lead, they made their way down the corridor, carefully and swiftly. When they heard girls' voices or footsteps approaching, they took cover until they'd passed. They really were skating on thin ice.

They suffered alarm after alarm.

What the heck are we doing…?

They weren't in any position to laugh at the situation, but Elliot was finding it funnier and funnier.

He and Leo might as well be playing undercover agents.

Just as they arrived in front of a certain door, Leo murmured, "Not good."

Elliot laid a hand on Leo's shoulder, making him turn around, and mouthed, *What's wrong?*

Pointing at the door, Leo whispered, "This is a common room. There's a secret passageway entrance in here, or there should be, but…" He sounded noncommittal. It didn't take Elliot long to notice, too. There were voices beyond the door. Bright, lively voices, flying back and forth. It sounded as if they were having a wonderful time.

The common room was located at a distance from the private rooms where students slept. Students without business here weren't likely to pass by.

But even so, they didn't have time to simply wait for the room's occupants to go elsewhere.

"There's nothing for it. Leo, let's think of some other way."

In response to Elliot's words, Leo said, "Uh-huh…," but he didn't move away from the door.

The longer they stayed in the corridor, the greater the possibility they'd be discovered.

Elliot decided that the best plan was to go back to that unused room one more time and see if they could get the mechanism for the secret passage to work. He tugged at Leo's arm, trying to get him to retrace their steps. Just as he did so, from inside the common room, he heard a certain phrase.

Almost involuntarily, Elliot spoke the words himself.

"……'Master Blue Rose'—?"

What was that supposed to be? he wondered. Who was it? The girl's voice that came to them faintly from the common room sounded rapturous.

"Do you recall that, last month, there was a report that Master Blue Rose had yawned during class? Well, you see… Master Blue Rose is a silver-haired vampire who slips into the girls' dormitory every night and drinks blood from one of us, and so during the day—"

The speaker's voice was partially drowned out by high-pitched squeals and giggles.

"Hey, Leo. ……What's all this?" Elliot asked in a small, thoroughly disgusted voice.

Leo looked back at him. "Umm……"

Even as he waited for Leo's response, the girls' conversation continued.

"Let me go next, if you would. I think Master Blue Rose is—"

Elliot kept his voice low.

"……So they're setting up somebody from our school as 'Master Blue Rose' and getting all excited talking about him? It sounds as if they're adding some crazy stuff, too, like he's a vampire—Is that actually fun or something?"

"They do sound as if they're having fun."

At Leo's response, Elliot muttered, "Girls make no sense."

However, he thought, they could do whatever they wanted. It was nothing to do with him. —Not that he knew who their "Master Blue Rose" was.

Elliot thought for a minute.

"Somebody girls like… Would that be Gerald, maybe?"

"In Gerald's case, it's more that he pays too much attention to girls than that the girls like him."

Now that he mentioned it, that sounded about right. Elliot looked convinced. Impressed, he glanced at Leo.

"You really watch other people, don't you?"

"Not at all. I'm not even interested in them."

Leo shook his head. "But," he continued:

"Some things are easier to see when you aren't trying to look. You *see* them, whether you want to or not."

Beyond the screen of his hair and glasses, Leo was smiling faintly.

Elliot knew that Leo wore glasses and grew his hair long to hide his face, not because he didn't want to be seen, but because he "didn't want to *see*" the world. Maybe that was why: Although he was smiling, Leo's smile didn't look like a smile at all.

Elliot wondered whether he'd *seen* what he knew about Gerald and Marcel that way, too. …This wasn't the time to discuss it, though.

"Well, never mind. Let's go. For now, we'll head back to that room—"

Just as Elliot whispered, a new voice began to speak inside the room.

'Today, I saw a teacher summon Master Blue Rose to the guidance office.'

At those words, Elliot remembered his noon recess that day. He'd also gone to the guidance office, summoned by one of the female teachers. Since he was a member of the House of Nightray, his teachers also paid a lot of attention to him, and they sometimes asked him about this and that.

However, many students were summoned to the guidance office every day.

Students who'd earned warnings for being tardy to class, students being scolded for breaking school rules… Apparently "Master Blue Rose" had been one of them. Elliot had no sympathy for him. The fact that they were having their discussion at his expense this way, amusing themselves with him, meant that, in other words:

The guy gives them way too many openings!

'I'm quite certain that teacher is after him. When he enters the guidance office, she tries to seduce him. 'Now then, Elliot-kun. Come to me'—"

Elliot-kun? ……What, ME?!

He felt a violent sinking sensation, as if he were falling.

Then a storm of fierce emotions welled up.

……Wait! Wait wait wait wait. Why!? Why are they talking about me like this? Openings? I don't have *any openings! ……Well, I was prepared for people to talk about me, but as a Nightray, a member of the four great dukedoms, not as…… Or is that why? Did my brothers and sister, or—I can't see it, but—even my father, go through this? Is this the duty of the elite?!*

Elliot's spine was quivering.

He couldn't sense anything like malice in the voices he heard. Quite the opposite, in fact.

That didn't mean he could feel happy about it.

The being he called "himself" was being put to selfish use and used to entertain the girls, as if it were a stuffed animal or something. On his pride as a man, Elliot didn't think he could take it. The urge to barge in

yelling and make them stop was nearly unbearable.

But what would happen if he did? Yes, this was the girls' dorm, territory where boys were absolutely not allowed.

Calm down, calm down, calm—Rrgh—

He desperately suppressed the torrent of emotions with reason.

"…And then, you see, I've thought of a different development for that yawn which we spoke of earlier. It's possible that Master Blue Rose really doesn't sleep at night. You see, although there is no way for us to know, a secret banquet is held in the boys' dormitory every night, and Master Blue Rose presides over it as king of the night—"

What *"secret banquet"?!* What *"king of the night"~~~~~?!!*

His emotions sent his reason flying.

Elliot flung his arm up, on the verge of striking the door open……but, at the very last minute, Leo held him back, curbing him with a tiny, sharp, "No, Elliot, don't. You'll cause a scene."

However, as a man, he couldn't keep silent any longer. Shaking Leo's arms off, Elliot prepared to beat his way into the common room. Leo blocked him. The two pushed and pulled at each other, scuffling, just barely managing not to make any loud noises.

They'd gone on like that for a few moments when, suddenly, from inside the common room…

A girl spoke in tones that were clearly different from the rose-tinged voices they'd been hearing.

There was a tense silence.

"The time has come to reveal the full content of Project Coronation to you."

The significant-sounding words woke Elliot from his rampage.

Coronation? He and Leo looked at each other. The word seemed to have caught Leo's attention as well.

The voice continued:

"It is a project I myself and Matilda over there have been carrying out for Master Blue Rose's sake. I trust you're all aware of the vote which was held—secretly, yet on a grand scale—among the girls last month? 'Sparkle! The First Ranking of Boys Most Suited to be Prefect.' The boy who triumphed over the current prefects for the glorious first-place spot was our Master Blue Rose."

What the heck? thought Elliot.

He hadn't had the foggiest idea that something like that had been carried out in secret, in the shadow of school life.

The glorious first-place spot? Prefect was a tiresome role, and he'd never once wanted to be one.

The voice continued:

"As you see, then, this dream belongs, not only to the Blue Rose Club, but to the entire female student body. Prefect is a glorious position granted only to students chosen by this academy. We will do away with

Gerald, a prefect unfit for the position, and install our own Master Blue Rose—”

……!

Elliot remembered the threatening letter Gerald had received.

Resign from being prefect.

He remembered Gerald on the floor after falling down the stairs.

Gerald seemed to have thought that the culprit was Marcel, but—

It was these guys……?!

Elliot shook Leo off mainly by force and kicked open the door to the common room. The door opened with a terrific bang, and Elliot stalked in. Drawing himself up to his full height in the common room doorway, he denounced them with all the lung power he had:

“I just heard something I can’t ignore, you lot—!!”

It must have seemed like a bolt from the blue.

Every girl in the room froze, petrified. A nearly painful number of shocked glances were focused on Elliot.

Then one girl called Elliot's name in a choked voice. She was the one who had been speaking about "Project Coronation" a moment before.

In a trembling, slightly hoarse voice, she said:

"…Master Blue Rose…?"

Elliot roared at her, as if to kill that nickname dead:

"Don't call me stupid names! My name is Elliot… Elliot Nightray, a son of the four great dukedoms!"

He announced his name.

On the pride in his breast.

At that, from behind him, still out in the corridor, Leo said, "Aw…

"This is the girls' dormitory, protected territory completely off-limits to boys, and you just yelled your name at the top of your lungs. … You're going to be a school legend, you know.

"Congratulations," he said. He even clapped.

Letting his seething fury take over, Elliot forced Leo's words down with a "Who cares?!" When he thought of how Gerald had treated Marcel, Elliot couldn't forgive him, either. Still, that didn't mean it was okay to push Gerald down the stairs in what amounted to a surprise attack. And besides—

Grinding his teeth, Elliot pressed them further.

"What's this about doing away with people, you wretches?! Even for villainy, you've gone too far! —*Have you no shame?!*"

"P-Project Coronation was…something Matilda and I advanced on our own. The other girls had no knowledge of it. Besides, 'do away with' was a…an overstatement, made for effect. We didn't really intend to go that far—"

"Quit making excuses. It's despicable!"

Elliot glared at the girls' ringleader, condemnation in his eyes.

Uneasy voices called to her, here and there—"Josephine-sama…"—and Elliot's gaze traveled across the girls seated on the sofas.

One lone girl was standing in the corner, and she flinched. As if trying to escape from Elliot, she backed up and sat down hard, half-falling onto the sofa. At once, Josephine the ringleader called her name: "Matilda."

"They're a group called the Blue Rose Club."

Leo, who'd still been out in the corridor, spoke as he entered the common room. Coming up beside Elliot, he continued:

"Their formal name is The Society of Young Ladies who Admire Master Blue Rose. They're your fan club, Elliot. Only…they do seem to have gotten a bit out of control."

"Ahn? Why do *you* know that?"

Elliot sounded suspicious, and the girls' eyes, colored with that same "why," turned to focus on Leo. "Coincidence," Leo said, brushing them off, and took a step forward. Through his glasses, he fixed his gaze on each girl in turn.

"Well, Elliot's looks aren't that bad, and you could probably call the fact that he's idiotically straightforward one of his good points. Still, he's fastidious about weird things, not to mention really proud, quick with his fists, foul-mouthed—"

"Why did you switch to talking smack about me?!"

Leo pretended not to hear Elliot's complaint. He glanced at Josephine.

"I think you went too far this time. Threatening Gerald, hurting him and trying to get him to abandon his position as prefect… Gerald's the only sixth-year student in our group, so if that happened, there was a decent possibility that Elliot would be chosen to replace him…"

After a pause, Leo went on.

"But becoming prefect because of something like that…… Did you really think that would make him happy?"

As he spoke, his gaze slid over to Matilda, who was shivering on the sofa.

Then:

"—Did you, Marcel?"

He called a name.

……*Huh?*

When Leo said that name, Elliot's mind became an overwhelming blank.

He thought he'd misheard, or that Leo had misspoken.

Matilda. Marcel. The names did sound a bit alike, after all. Leo just watched Matilda, steadily.

Matilda looked down, avoiding his gaze; she was trembling. Elliot had no idea what was going on, and all he could do was stay silent. Like Elliot, the other girls also seemed speechless.

"What about it, Marcel?" Leo said the name again.

Elliot stretched a hand out to Leo's shoulder, as if he'd awakened from sleep paralysis. When he spoke, his voice sounded mildly appalled.

"Leo, what are you talking about?"

"There are no girls named Matilda at Lutwidge Academy. I shouldn't think anyone knows which class she's in. …Well, maybe you know, Josephine. You probably arranged this."

Even as Leo spoke, his voice filled with certainty, Elliot ran to Matilda.

Matilda covered her head with her arms, as if she was afraid she'd be hit.

Her hair was the same as Leo's: long enough to hide her face. Elliot reached out and grabbed it. Then he yanked as hard as he could. It didn't take much strength; it rustled and came off Matilda's head with

startling ease. —It was a wig.

The hair and face that peeked out from beneath it certainly did belong to…

"You're……Marcel!"

It was Marcel—a student in Elliot's year, who lived in Elliot's dorm—and his face was the picture of fear. Marcel had always been teased for being more suited to the girls' uniform than the boys', and even without the wig, the girls' uniform didn't look odd on him.

Of course, Elliot was startled.

However, the shock was probably greater for the girls who had shared their club activities with "her." At first, a stunned silence hung over the group, but finally a spectacular *"Eeeeeeeeeeh—!?"* rang out.

"Come on, Elliot, think back."

Leo began to speak, in a tone that seemed to say, *Can't you even understand* this*? But it's so simple!*

"That threatening letter was delivered to Gerald in the boys' dorm, and that's also where he was pushed down the stairs."

"……What about it?" Elliot looked puzzled.

"Just as the girls' dorm is off-limits to boys, the boys' dorm is off-limits to girls. It would be much too risky for a girl to go to the trouble of sneaking in, as I'm sure you know. If a girl was going to do something like that, it would have been much safer for her to make the attempt inside the school building. In other words, the culprit had to have been someone for whom being in the boys' dorm wasn't a risk: a guy."

"Well, when you put it that way…"

Leo's explanation had convinced Elliot, but those were still the only words he could get out.

Leo went on:

"When I heard their discussion from the corridor, all I thought was that they probably had a male accomplice somewhere. However, when we came into the room and I saw him, it clicked. …Well, if I hadn't heard Marcel's name from Gerald, even I wouldn't have caught on."

Leo glanced at Marcel, smiled cheerfully, and spoke to him: "That looks really good on you."

Then he added:

"When we left Gerald a bit ago, he seemed set to barge into your room right away. I bet he struck out there and has completely lost his temper right about now. He'd never dream you were in the girls' dorm."

As Leo spoke, Marcel was silent, his shoulders trembling.

As if to speak for him, Josephine opened her mouth. In a voice that seemed to say the game was up, she accepted it, and she regretted her actions, she said:

"When he…when Marcel learned of the Blue Rose Club's existence, he came and said he wanted to join. That was about half a year ago. I was troubled. You see, we conducted our activities quietly,

surreptitiously. A group that was all girls save for one lone boy would stand out…… And so I thought I'd turn him away. However, his enthusiasm got the better of me."

To that end, she'd informed him that, if he wore a wig, donned the female students' uniform, gave a false girl's name, and pretended to be a girl, he would be allowed to attend. She also said he'd been required to be quiet, speaking as little as possible during meetings.

And so Marcel had joined the Blue Rose Club as the female student "Matilda."

Taking up where Josephine had left off, Marcel began to speak, haltingly.

"…I was the one who heard about last month's vote and proposed Project Coronation to Josephine-sama. I'd always thought that Elliot-kun would make a much better prefect than stupid Gerald-san. If I was going to take care of somebody, serve somebody, I wanted it to be Elliot-kun. That's why—"

Marcel was unable to continue past that point.

…Because Elliot had grabbed his shirtfront and yanked him up, forcing him to his feet.

Then Elliot pulled Marcel right up to him.

Elliot and Marcel faced each other, so close that the tips of their noses almost touched. A few of the girls seated on the sofas gave tiny, appreciative squeals, but when Leo looked at them, glasses glinting, they hastily fell silent.

Elliot took one slow, deep breath.

"—Marcel. I'm not going to hit you."

His furious, merciless gaze bored directly into Marcel's eyes.

Then he continued, his words frankly scornful:

"I won't, because you aren't a guy who's worth hitting yet. I have zero interest in being prefect. However, if I wanted to be one, I'd use my own strength to take the position. It's just like Leo said. You thought I'd accept being made prefect through underhanded methods like that. That means you could never be my valet. Quit playing me for a fool…!"

At this scathing condemnation, despair spread across Marcel's face.

Elliot let go, shoving him away. Dropping back onto the sofa, Marcel said, "I'm sorry…" in a trembling voice. Then words seemed to fail him.

A heavy silence filled the common room.

Overawed by Elliot's anger, no one seemed able to make a sound. However, in the midst of that silence, Leo fixed quiet eyes on Elliot. His lips moved very slightly, forming the words, *Such a kind soul*, but he didn't say them aloud, and no one noticed.

Before long:

"And anyway—"

Elliot spoke as though spitting the words out, but there was a fearless smile somewhere in his prickly attitude:

“Valets are a pain in the butt. Leo’s the only one I need.”

After that declaration, he shut his mouth.

Behind him, Leo said, in his usual tone, “I’m well aware of that.” Then, as if to brush away the heavy atmosphere that filled the room, he continued cheerfully:

“Elliot’s a pain-in-the-butt master, too, you see, and you’re delicate, Marcel. I really can’t recommend him.”

Turning to glare at Leo, Elliot grumbled, “Can it.” However, something about his expression made it look as though he was enjoying himself. Then, abruptly, his face went grim again. This time he turned to Josephine, pointing at her.

“You people, too! Your whatever-it-was club. As of today, consider yourselves disbanded! You’re done!”

At that proclamation, Josephine gasped. She leapt up from the sofa.

“Please wait, Master Blue… I mean, Elliot Nightray-sama!”

“No excuses! I’m the one you were having fun chewing to pieces, and I say you’re done!”

“B-but! Would it not be sufficient if Marcel and I alone left—”

Josephine did regret her actions, of course. However, she didn’t seem able to accept that the entire Blue Rose Club should be punished, including the girls who had had nothing to do with the scheme.

That said, Elliot wasn’t willing to give an inch, either.

All Elliot would say was “Disband,” while Josephine kept insisting that no one except herself and Marcel had had anything to do with it. The girls watched this battle for the fate of the Blue Rose Club with bated breath. A threatening atmosphere filled the common room, and the matter showed no signs of being settled anytime soon.

Then: “Hmm……” Leo, thinking hard, seemed to hit on an idea. Slowly, his lips parted.

“In that case, let me relay the final message from Gardener ‘M’ to you.”

At those words, all the female students—and Marcel—stared at him in astonishment.

“Gardener ‘M’? What’s that?”

Only Elliot didn’t understand. “Later,” Leo told him, and continued:

“I also think you should disband. This incident was—”

When he’d gotten that far, Josephine raised her voice: “Wait just a moment!”

Leo looked at her. She was so startled she’d gone pale. In a hoarse voice, Josephine said:

“You’re… You were Gardener ‘M’?”

When Leo nodded, Josephine whirled around to look at Marcel.

"Th-the letters said 'Don't pry,' so I refrained from asking, but… I thought Marcel was the gardener… His name starts with *M*, after all……"

All the girls turned to Marcel, but Marcel shook his head.

"May I continue?" Leo asked, but there was no reply. Leo tilted his head slightly, perplexed.

"Mm, well, never mind. I'll continue. —Even if this happened because a few members got out of control, it's true that the existence of the Blue Rose Club caused it by inviting excessive fanaticism. For that reason, I can't allow the club to remain, either."

No one could argue. Everyone looked down, hanging their heads.

"However, each of you is free to consider Elliot something special, to think of him and about him. Even Elliot won't intrude on your individual hearts and force you to change your thoughts. I really can't imagine he would."

"Well, I, uh……"

Emotionally, Elliot still objected, but he couldn't say it.

As Elliot watched Leo speak in that matter-of-fact voice, he also seemed to see him as he'd been when he was still at the House of Fianna. Leo had called the younger children his brothers and sisters. When one of the older ones had been mean to another child, and Leo had reprimanded them, this was how he'd looked.

In contrast to Elliot, who'd faltered, Josephine hesitantly voiced her lingering regrets.

"But our precious assembly…"

"Yeah, I know. Listen."

Speaking in a rather light tone, Leo approached Josephine and whispered something in her ear.

When, after a short while, Leo drew back, Josephine's face wore a sunny smile.

"I understand. Today, as of this moment, the Blue Rose Club is disbanded."

Her proclamation was delivered with good grace.

On hearing it, disappointment showed on all the girls' faces. However, no one complained. "That's that, then," Leo smiled, turning to Elliot, and conversely, Elliot felt irritation start to build inside him.

It was true that the matter of the Blue Rose Club had been resolved. …But.

Leo had known about the Blue Rose Club.

Leo had introduced himself to the girls as Gardener "M."

The girls had obeyed Leo's words obediently.

They were master and servant, and friends on top of that, but it didn't mean they had to reveal everything to each other.

However, having lots of secrets floating around didn't feel good.

Irritably, Elliot struck the floor of the common room with the toe of his shoe, crossed his arms, and began the interrogation.

"…Hey. Hurry up and explain all this to me, starting at the beginning. I've got the right to hear it."

"Yes, you do."

Leo agreed easily.

"Are you planning to stay here, though? The common room may be built to make it hard to hear what goes on inside, but I don't think it's a good idea for us to camp. You were being very loud, you know."

At Leo's words, Elliot froze for a moment. Then, with an expression that said as plain as day that their circumstances had slipped his mind, that he'd forgotten they were intruders in the girls' dorm, he muttered:

"……Oh."

* * *

"Well, I technically did it for you, Elliot."

They were in a narrow, pitch-black passageway, barely wide enough for one person, when Leo spoke. Elliot, who was walking very carefully ahead of Leo, asked, "For me?"

As Leo had guessed, the common room had held the entrance to a secret passageway. Josephine had operated the mechanism of the entrance to the corridor—which had been, she said, a secret handed down through the years, known only to girls' dormitory prefects—and let the two of them escape.

As Elliot walked, feeling his way along the wall, he asked again, "What do you mean, 'for me'?"

"I found out about the Blue Rose Club by chance, a while ago. It was a quiet group back then, but it also felt as if things could get out of hand at any time. I thought about telling you, but you're terrible at dealing with things like that, so I didn't."

Disgusted, Elliot was silent. When he thought back to what had just happened in the common room, he had to admit that Leo had probably made the right call.

"I thought that, as long as they weren't starved for information, the Blue Rose Club would stay quiet. To keep the pressure from building up, I sent them a certain amount of information from our end on a regular basis under the name Gardener 'M,' before they came looking for it. Information about you, I mean. Although, in the end, it looks like they got out of hand anyway."

"W-w-wait just a minute. 'Sent them information'……*You* did?"

"Right. I sent letters about how you tried to leave your vegetables at breakfast; things like that. Girls are really tough to understand, though. I didn't manage to read them completely."

“That’s not what I meant! What the hell were you doing, you jerk?!”

Elliot couldn’t help himself: He yelled. He turned around in the darkness, but although Leo couldn’t have been that far away, he couldn’t see him. That meant he couldn’t grab him by the shirtfront.

Leo spoke, calmly:

“If I hadn’t done that, they would have intruded further and further into your private life. Before long, they might have been peeping into our room. You didn’t want that either, did you?”

He spoke without hesitation, and the logic seemed sound. *But*, Elliot thought. Leo had, without a doubt, been at least a little entertained. “……Haaaaah.” Elliot gave a long sigh, then asked a question that had been on his mind:

“By the way, what’s with the ‘M’? You don’t have an *M* in your name.”

“Oh, it’s the first letter of ‘menace,’” Leo answered nonchalantly. “It means ‘threat,’ and similar things. —It meant that the gardener definitely wasn’t the Blue Rose Club’s ally.”

In the end, Elliot thought, it had been Leo’s words that had done away with the Blue Rose Club, so “threat” had been entirely accurate. His valet had a rather extreme side to him, and if words alone hadn’t done it, there was no telling what methods he might have used. He didn’t even want to imagine it.

Leo continued, smiling wryly, oblivious to what Elliot was feeling.

“Still, it ended up becoming a weird source of pocket money, and that was a problem.”

Pocket money. The word had come out of nowhere, and Elliot gave a foolish-sounding “Huh?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They said it was a gratuity for providing information as the gardener. They always left it where I left the letters.”

“……I’m so appalled I can’t even— Whoa?”

Possibly because he’d been concentrating on his conversation with Leo, when the dark passageway turned into stairs leading down, Elliot lost his balance and almost fell. Somehow he managed to hang on. The stairs in the secret passage were steep, and if he fell, he wasn’t likely to walk away unscathed.

Now that he thought of it, Josephine had said to be careful of the stairs. Apparently a prefect had fallen down them and died once.

“Man, that’s not safe… Stairs, Leo.”

“Yeah. So you see, I did tell you it wasn’t anything important.”

“—???”

He didn’t know what Leo was saying. However, as he slowly descended the stairs, an unpleasant premonition began to well up in Elliot’s heart. *Just maybe*, he thought. He was a little afraid to ask, but he did anyway, praying that that wouldn’t be it.

"Do you mean, uh, that…"

"Right. That bookmark I gave you. I bought it with that pocket money. Since I'd earned it selling information about you, I thought that was probably the best thing to do with it. Come to think of it, I wonder where that white cat went. I'd forgotten about it. Well, it's probably dark outside anyway. I guess we won't be able to look for it anymore. Right, Elliot? …Elliot?"

"……

No matter how many times he called him, Elliot was silent.

Even he couldn't put a name to the emotion that churned inside him. It felt a bit like anger, and a bit like embarrassment, and a bit like futility… A little like all of them, or maybe like none of them. He just felt muddled, and dissatisfied, and as if it wasn't fair.

"Hey, Elliot."

When Leo called him again, Elliot answered in a voice so low it seemed to echo from the depths of hell.

"A thing like that… Even if we find it, even if I get it back…"

"You'll throw it away? That's fine, too; I don't mind."

Leo sounded as if he truly didn't care.

Elliot gave a short groan. Girls entertaining themselves by picking apart his private life over their tea. Money earned in exchange. The bookmark, bought with that money. …In other words, he felt, carrying that around as if it was something important would be the same as approving of what the girls had done. He really and truly couldn't accept that, and yet…

He'd gotten that bookmark from Leo. He'd been rather—no, very—fond of it.

He'd liked it so much he'd thought he *had* to get it back, no matter what.

But.

But.

But—

In Elliot's mind, a balance that held the choices "Throw it away" and "Keep it" on its two scales wavered and rocked, back and forth. It was beginning to give him a mild headache.

They went down, down, down the stairs, until they reached the first floor. Then they made their way by touch again. They'd been told that the secret passageway came out behind the girls' dorm, in a place that was almost always deserted. As they went, Elliot managed to squeeze out the words that were lodged in his throat, spitting them out by force.

"…That…stupid bookmark! I…… I'll……I'm……gonna—"

"Toss it? Keep it?"

Leo spoke from behind him. Elliot yelled, a bit desperately:

"I won't toss it! But I'll shut it away somewhere, and I'm not going to think about it ever again! I'll forget it completely!"

At Elliot's response, from behind him, Leo laughed merrily.

When they got outside, he might actually punch Leo, Elliot thought, as if he were cursing him— And just then, he walked straight into the wall in front of him with a *thunk*. He hadn't been looking out for it, and he'd whacked his nose hard. The dull pain made his eyes water.

The dark was partially to blame, but he'd been distracted by Leo behind him, and he apparently hadn't been paying enough attention to where he was going.

It was the first-floor end of the secret passageway.

"……Oww…… If there's a wall there, then *say* so!"

Elliot kicked the silent wall, taking his anger out on it for no good reason. At the kick, the mechanism in the wall creaked into motion, and the door began to swing outward. The wind that rushed into the stagnant passage carried the scent of night air, and it was cold.

Outside, night had fallen, and moonlight streamed down through gaps in the clouds. They were behind the girls' dorm. It was a simple plot of land, not really fit for the term "garden."

A lone shape stood there.

Possibly it had been startled when the wall abruptly began to move and opened up: It was frozen, facing the passageway where Elliot and Leo stood. They'd been told that this place was nearly always deserted, but there was someone here… A female student. For a moment, both Elliot and Leo were speechless.

With difficulty, Leo spoke the girl's name:

"Ada Vessalius…"

Meanwhile, hearing her name, Ada looked at the two who'd appeared and said, "Elliot-kun? Leo-kun? Huh? What?" She sounded confused. Of course she was: Part of it was due to the fact that they'd come out of the wall, but the building they'd emerged from was the girls' dorm. Ada didn't seem to understand any of it.

And—

Ada was holding a white cat to her chest. A white cat with a bookmark in its mouth. On noticing it, Elliot yelled involuntarily:

"That cat! Moon!"

"What? 'Moon'? This little one is Snowdrop… Oh, um, I did make sure to leave him at home this morning, but, um……"

Confronted by Elliot's menacing glare, Ada explained hastily. However, most of what she said didn't reach Elliot. All he understood was that the cat's name was Snowdrop, and that its owner was…

Elliot's shoulders quivered. Slowly, in a terribly cold voice, he spat out the words, "You're the owner?" Ada probably meant to answer, "Yes," but she was so overawed that it came out as "Ye-yesh."

That said, Elliot didn't care about the response. The uproar that had taken up his entire day swept across his mind like a whirlwind.

Elliot drew a deep, deep breath, and then:

“It was *you*, Ada Vessaliuuu

today, and all you do is get in the way. You're an eyesore! Hey, are you listening to me?! Get that vacant look off your face!"

…And so on and so forth, for a very long time.

She thought it was probably the first time she'd ever been criticized so acidly and at such length. Ada had been engulfed by Elliot's fury, and she'd just stood there, silently, and let him take her to task.

How long had Elliot angrily chewed her out, shaking his friend off when he tried to restrain him?

Finally, possibly because he'd run out of complaints, he'd left with an irritated snort.

After being showered with complaints and abuse for so long, Ada had come to understand something. She knew she might not be very perceptive, but even she'd understood. He might have yelled at her because of the trouble Snowdrop had caused him, but Elliot hadn't liked her to begin with.

Ada knew about the discord between the House of Vessalius and the House of Nightray. However, she'd thought that, as long as she didn't pay any attention to it, it wouldn't matter at all, wouldn't be anything to do with her.

She'd wanted to be friends with him simply because he was *his* little brother, and she'd thought that she could.

That hadn't been the case.

"…Onii-chan…" Ada murmured, quietly.

"I wonder if you could be friends with Elliot-kun…"

She was proud of her big brother. He was intelligent and cheerful, a clever conversationalist, good-looking and reliable, and if *he* tried…he might have been able to step right over the discord between the two houses and talk freely with Elliot. At that thought, Ada shook her head.

She was acting spoiled. Even though she knew she needed to do her best with what she had—

…But what should she do?

"……Haaah." Another sigh.

Ada dropped her gaze to the floor of the corridor and thought.

I've had them take care of Snowdrop and Kitty properly at home since then…

She'd asked the servants to watch them and make sure they didn't leave the house. As a result, since that day, the cats hadn't come to school once. Ada was still mulling over whether or not this was something she should keep up next week.

She thought some more.

Since then, I haven't spoken to Elliot-kun.

Ada and Elliot were in different years, and as a rule, they almost never interacted. She'd only seen him at school a few times, and if their eyes met, he just glared at her. There really hadn't been any way for her to speak to him.

I still haven't…apologized.

She hadn't apologized for the trouble Snowdrop had caused him. When he'd yelled at her, Ada had just stood there silently, and she'd been in such a daze that, as Elliot and Leo had left, she hadn't been able to speak to them.

Even if he did hate her. Even if they couldn't be friends. Even so.

I have to apologize properly—

As Ada hung her head, she heard the sound of footsteps traveling through the corridor.

Abruptly, two of the sets of footsteps stopped beside Ada.

Ada looked up.

Her eyes met Elliot's, who'd stopped nearby and was glaring at her. Leo was beside him.

"Oh, Elli—"

Just as she spoke his name, she remembered she'd been told not to say it casually, and she faltered.

Her reaction alone had probably been enough to tell Elliot she'd been waiting for him. Elliot's expression was cross; he only shot a sharp glance at Ada, then made as if to leave. Just as Leo asked him, "Are you sure?" Ada spoke:

"Um, I'm sorry!" She said it vigorously, bowing her head low.

Elliot stopped again and said, "…What do you want?" He sounded irritated.

"Snowdrop caused trouble for you, and I hadn't apologized yet."

"…Is that all?"

Elliot spoke coldly. Ada nodded, timidly.

"I don't need an apology. Come on, Leo."

From his tone, Ada couldn't tell if he'd forgiven her or if her apology had been rejected entirely. Prompting Leo to move, Elliot began walking away from Ada. Her eyes fell on the book he had in his hand.

"*Holy Knight*—"

At Ada's words, Elliot glanced back. Ada hadn't expected him to turn, and she hastily said:

"Oh, um, when— When I was little, someone read a children's edition to me… My big brother had the whole Holy Knight series in his room. He really liked it… I-I'm sure you'd have lots to talk about—"

Ada had involuntarily grown talkative, but under Elliot's prickly gaze, she trailed off.

"Do you seriously think I'd sit down and chat with a Vessalius man? Anyway, the guy's dead."

"Elliot. A little tact?"

Leo reprimanded him. Elliot turned away in a huff, and Ada shook her head. "It's all right, Leo-kun." Elliot moved away from Ada, as if he had no more to discuss. As he walked off with Leo, without looking back, he spoke:

"Who was your brother's favorite character?"

"Huh?" Ada was at a loss.

Elliot had sounded as though he'd asked about something he wasn't very interested in, just for the sake of asking. He looked as if he'd leave right away if Ada didn't answer.

Ada hadn't read *Holy Knight* since her brother's disappearance. She didn't know much about the characters, and her memories were vague, but… She had heard her brother talk about his favorite character. She was fairly sure it had been one of the two characters at the center of the story. Their names were Edgar and Edwin.

One was the protagonist, and one was his valet. —Which had it been?

Flustered and feeling as if she had to say something quickly, before Elliot left, Ada ventured an answer, working from her hazy memories:

"I-I think it was Edwin-san."

In that instant, Elliot smiled… Or Ada thought he had.

He wasn't looking at her, so all she saw was a change in the air around him, so slight she thought she might have imagined it. …But.

"I see. Well, if you'd said Edgar, the valet, there really wouldn't have been any help for him."

"I-I think…that was it." Ada really wasn't confident.

"Never mind. Just because I talked to you a little, don't think you can just walk up and talk to me next time."

On that cold note, Elliot left with Leo. Left behind, as she watched them go, Ada ended up thinking it anyway: In a corner of her heart, she thought of her vanished brother. If it had been him. If he were here.

If onii-chan were here, he and Elliot-kun might—

Might overcome the discord between the two houses. Might turn the relationship between the Vessaliuses and the Nightrays…into something good.

Ada thought, as if she was praying to something far away.

Blue Rose Club

THAT SAME DAY, AFTER SCHOOL.

In a corner of the Lutwidge Academy quadrangle was a brick terrace. Girls wandered onto this terrace, with its rows of three-legged tables, one or two at a time. Greeting each other with "Good day to you," they took their seats. Finally, Josephine arrived as well and settled herself at one of the tables.

"Good day to you," the others said, and Josephine returned the greeting. The girls at the tables were the members of the disbanded Blue Rose Club.

However, even when all the seats were filled with girls, Josephine didn't begin the meeting. Quietly, she opened her volume of poetry,

listening happily to the conversations at the tables as she read. Of the voices, Mia's stood out with particular clarity.

In animated tones, she was talking about how Elliot had looked when she'd seen him that day. Bright voices interjected from around her, and laughter rose here and there.

I really am glad, Josephine thought.

That day, in the common room. Elliot and Leo had told them that the Blue Rose Club must disband. Josephine had been having a difficult time accepting this, when Leo had whispered in her ear:

"If individual girls happen to follow Elliot with their eyes, then talk about it, they're free to do so. And, if those people happen to meet each other, by accident, they might begin to have fun discussing the same topic. Several such people might even gather in the same place. …Every once in a while."

Yes: The Blue Rose Club was no more.

The students gathered around the tables just happened to be girls who admired the same student. That was all. As a result, Josephine didn't declare the beginning of any meeting, and she didn't lead.

"And so, you see, just then, Master Blue Ro— I mean Elliot-senpai, was terribly gallant!"

As the name they'd decided not to use anymore almost slipped out, Mia stuck out her tongue slightly.

Josephine found the sight charming.

There was no order: Each individual simply spoke as she pleased, and listened, and the time passed peacefully. When the girls seemed to have finished talking, and the terrace was enveloped in an atmosphere of satisfaction, Josephine closed her book of poems.

"All right, ladies. Shall we?"

Her words were met with a delighted, collective "Yes." Josephine made her announcement:

"Let the first meeting of The Society of Young Ladies who Admire Master Black Rose—the Black Rose Club—begin."

* * *

"Nn? What's the matter, Leo?"

Elliot, who'd been lying on his bed in their room in the boys' dorm, spoke to Leo, who was sitting on the floor reading a mystery. Leo, who was immersed in the story, had suddenly shivered and hunched his shoulders up, as if he'd grown cold.

"Oh, no, it's nothing."

As he murmured, Leo looked around uneasily. His expression didn't seem entirely convinced.

"…I just got this abrupt chill."

* * *

Elliot had stormed into the common room.

Leo had followed him in.

Leo had covered for Elliot's fierce, stubborn actions with intelligent words, calmly and easily, and as they watched him, the hearts of the girls of the Blue Rose Club had beaten faster. "Master Black Rose" was the courtesy title they'd bestowed on Leo.

"Now then. Although this is the monumental first meeting of the Black Rose Club, there is one thing we must do first."

At Josephine's words, the girls nodded, and their eyes turned toward a certain empty seat at one of the three-legged tables. It was the seat where Matilda, the consistently inconspicuous member of the Blue Rose Club, had often sat.

Matilda…or rather, the male student Marcel, wouldn't be appearing here anymore. He'd said so himself.

"Elliot-kun is kind. Back then, he said, 'You're not yet *worth hitting.' 'Not yet.' I want to become the type of guy who's worth hitting… A guy who can fight, who can meet him on equal terms. …And so I'm going to quit looking at him simply as someone to idolize."*

Even after learning that Matilda had really been a boy named Marcel, the girls had been sad to see him go, and they had wished him well.

"Now then, my dears. Shall we go?"

At Josephine's words, the girls stood. Then, with Josephine in the lead, they began to make their way to a certain destination.

There had been more to what Leo had whispered to Josephine in the common room.

"I know I told you to disband, but there's one thing I'd like your group to do for me. Gerald's been harassing Marcel. Would you help stop it?"

She'd had no reason to refuse.

When she'd told the other girls, they'd immediately promised to help, for Marcel's sake.

And so—

Gerald was still in the school building. When Josephine and the girls surrounded him and denounced him, he tried to play innocent.

"Why, I have no idea what you're talking about."

However, when he realized that wasn't going to work, he grudgingly admitted it. Gerald was constantly and painfully conscious of the female students. The result, apparently, was that he didn't want to harass Marcel badly enough to risk making enemies of Josephine and the other girls.

After that…

It goes without saying that the girls were thrilled:

“The leadership Master Black Rose displayed in entrusting this matter to us was absolutely perfect, wasn’t it!”

Epilogue

It was a faint, distant sound, still out of reach. A sound from somewhere in the future.

* * *

One afternoon, about two months after Discipline Reinforcement Week.

……*What was that?*

Elliot had been lying on the sofa, dozing, with an open book over his face to shut out the light, when something pulled him back to wakefulness. He thought, perplexed.

He was on the fourth floor of the school building, in the anteroom next to the piano studio. The room wasn't off-limits to students, but for some reason, there were no students who used it regularly, which made it a nice, private, nearly secret spot. It had good sofas for sprawling out on, and Elliot often came here with Leo during the noon recess and commandeered the room all for himself.

……At first, it really had been just a "nearly secret spot," but the truth was that, at this point, students were careful to keep away from it because it was rumored to be "Elliot Nightray's favorite place"—not that Elliot knew this.

Still not sure what had awakened him, Elliot drifted again.

As he fell back into sleep, in a corner of his mind, he thought:

Oh, right. I'll have to get Holy Knight *back to the library soon—*

He'd checked the book out two months ago, but between this and that, he hadn't yet returned it. He'd already had it far longer than the Lutwidge Academy library allowed books to be checked out. If he didn't return it soon, he'd probably start getting complaints from the library assistants.

He had it in his bag, he thought, so all he'd have to do was head over to the library later.

He heard a knock at the door. The anteroom had two doors: one that

led to the adjacent studio, and one that opened into the corridor. The knock had come from the second door.

He sensed it when Leo, who'd been sitting on another sofa reading a book, stood up and walked over to the door.

The door opened with a *click*.

Immediately, he heard several sets of loud, agitated footsteps in the corridor. Elliot thought it might have been the faint echoes of this noise, coming to him through the wall, that had disturbed his nap.

In a voice tinged with faint disgust, he said:

"What's going on? It's so noisy."

Leo had been talking to the student who'd come to the room. He shut the door, answering as he did so.

"It would seem that intruders have somehow entered the academy, Elliot."

"…Huuh?"

At the unexpected response, Elliot lifted the book from his face and sat up. "What do you mean, 'intruders'?" he asked, but Leo only shook his head. "How should I know?"

"Well, whatever. The teachers or the disciplinary committee will deal with it."

"You're probably right."

"Leo, we're going to the library. I forgot to return a book."

"Sure," Leo answered. Elliot stood.

"Nn!" As he stretched lightly, his eyes fell on the musical score he'd tossed onto the end of the sofa. He cracked his neck, yawning a little. Elliot picked up the booklet of music, tapping his shoulder with it, and glanced at Leo.

"Before that, come hang out with me for a bit."

"Mm." He gestured to the door that led to the studio with his chin, inviting Leo to come play piano for four hands.

Leo nodded.

"Besides, if the intruders hear your music, it may purify their hearts and convince them to let themselves be caught."

"Moron. It's not that kind of music."

"Are you sure? Well, maybe it will get their attention and draw them here."

"What, we're supposed to catch them and turn them over to the teachers? What a pain," Elliot grumbled.

With the score tucked under his arm, he crossed to the door that led to the studio. Leo followed. Elliot didn't play the piano every time they used this room during the noon recess. Most of the songs he played were pieces he'd composed himself.

Elliot didn't know whether he had a knack for composing or not. He didn't care.

In any case, he'd never written a song with the intent of letting lots of

people hear it. He only tidied up melodies that popped into his head, to give to his family.

"What are we going to play?"

"Oh, you know—"

* * *

When they visited the library after finishing their duet, it was deserted.

Under ordinary circumstances, there should have been a library assistant in the information corner, at the very least. It might have had something to do with the fuss about the intruders, or maybe it was coincidence. He really should have completed the return procedures, but Elliot thought it would probably be okay if he just put the book back where it belonged.

It was the library assistant's fault for not being here when he'd come to return it, he thought. Immediately after entering the library, Leo had wandered away from Elliot, heading off into the stacks. To Leo-the-bookworm, the fact that the library was deserted meant only that it was a nice, quiet place to read.

Deciding to leave Leo to his own devices, Elliot took the book he was returning and headed toward an inner stack.

In front of the shelf he wanted, he saw a lone figure.

It was a male student, blond and a little on the short side… About as tall as Leo. He seemed glued—eagerly, excitedly—to the row of Holy Knight books on the shelf.

He was exclaiming ("Whoa!" "Awesome!") at every little thing, although it shouldn't have been that unusual to see all the volumes of a work as popular as Holy Knight in one place.

Maybe he's from way out in the sticks?

He thought this, even as he felt that something about the idea clashed with the atmosphere the boy wore.

Elliot walked up to him. The boy must have been completely engrossed; he didn't notice a thing. He seemed to be examining the toothless gap where the volume Elliot had borrowed should have been. He murmured, sounding perplexed:

"—But… Huh? There's a volume missing…?"

"Aah, sorry."

Elliot spoke from behind the boy, coming up to stand next to him. As he returned the volume in his hand to that gap, he said:

"I'd borrowed it just now."

The boy apparently hadn't noticed Elliot's approach until he spoke to him. He stepped away from the shelf, mildly startled, and looked at Elliot. Elliot also shot him a sidelong glance, his expression cold. The boy had bright golden hair and deep green eyes. His features seemed

childlike, and yet there was something about them that made him look a bit philosophical.

Elliot didn't recognize his face; this was the first time he'd seen it. Of course, Elliot didn't know every single student at Lutwidge Academy, so this wasn't all that unusual.

"…Do you…"

Elliot spoke to the blond boy, who was watching him silently.

"…like this series…?"

Just as he said it…

—*Tunk.*

Elliot felt as if he'd heard a sound, inside his head.

What was that?

It was a very small sound. …Or maybe a faint feeling. Something so slight it would have been easy to think, *It's my imagination*, and forget about it right away.

> Elliot didn't know yet.
>
> It was a faint, distant sound, still out of reach. A sound from somewhere in the future.
>
> The sound of two fists striking each other, lightly, companionably.
>
> That sound would make itself heard in a story not yet told—

"Eh… Yeah, I love it…"

The blond boy answered Elliot's question…

…And the hand of fate began to move.

~ Fin ~

A SIDE EPISODE OF BLUE ROSE

HM?
...THAT'S THE LAST TIME.
ONCE I'M DONE WITH THAT BOOK, I'M NEVER USING IT AGAIN!
STILL USING THAT BOOKMARK, I SEE.
GIKU (FLINCH)
HMPH...
IT MAKES ME HAPPY THAT IT WAS USED AT LEAST ONCE.
OH?
PARA (FLIP)

STILL, THAT WAS QUITE A HEADACHE, WASN'T IT?
Eighteen
IT WAS ALL VERY MEMORABLE, BUT...
...I THINK THE BEST PART WAS YOUR BIG BROTHER.
WAAAH!
IT WAS ACTUALLY QUITE FUN!
TEE HEE!
DON'T SAY IT!! THAT GUY'S THE SHAME OF THE NIGHT-RAYS!!
WHAT DID YOU TELL THE HEAD-MASTER?
YOU SHUFFLED ME OFF TO THE INFIRMARY BY MYSELF.
JUST... EVERYTHING WE SAW AND HEARD.
THE HEADMASTER HAS TIES TO PANDORA.
BY NOW, MY FATHER'S PROBABLY HEARD ALL THE DETAILS TOO.
HUH.
IN A WAY, WE'RE LUCKY IT HAPPENED RIGHT BEFORE A LONG BREAK.
ONCE WE GET HOME, I'LL EXPLAIN THINGS TO FATHER PROPERLY, IN PERSON.

WE'LL PROBABLY GO ALONG ON HIS INSPECTION OF SABLIER AGAIN.
ISN'T THAT GREAT?
YOU'LL GET TO SEE THE RUGRATS AT THE HOUSE OF FIANNA. IT'S BEEN AWHILE.
LEO?
YEAH ...
.....
"WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU SAYING?"
ABOUT THE...THE "LACIE" SONG, YESTERDAY ...
.....
SAY... ELLIOT?

...NO
...
NEVER MIND.
SORRY
...

THIS SONG...
IT'S...

...HOLY KNIGHT.
HUH ...?
I DUNNO WHEN IT'S GONNA BE...
...BUT WHEN THE FINAL VOLUME COMES OUT...
...I'LL USE IT ONE LAST TIME.
THE BOOK-MARK.

YES.
PLEASE DO...
...ELLIOT.

The Story
of
the Family

HELLO BABY

A Lively Table

1

…Huh? Look at that crowd. What's going on?

One afternoon, as Oz Vessalius was walking down a corridor at Pandora Headquarters, he saw a group of uniformed Pandora staff up ahead. The atmosphere seemed too pleasant and genial for a work conversation. The group was clustered around a single employee, and he was talking to them about something.

His curiosity piqued, Oz trotted over to them. When he was close:

"Excuse me, could I ask what's going on?"

He peeked into the group from the rear, calling to them as politely as he could.

Up until that point, the employees hadn't noticed Oz's approach, and at his voice, they flinched and turned around, all at once. One of them bowed his head, saying, "I-I'm terribly sorry, Oz-sama! During work hours, but we're…," and the others followed suit, lowering their heads.

"Oh, no… Please don't. I wasn't trying to give you a warning or anything like that."

Oz waved one hand vigorously, giving them an awkward little smile. "Never mind that," he continued:

"What were you talking about? Something interesting?"

It was after lunch, and, with nothing in particular to do, he'd been bored. His valet Gilbert had gone off somewhere, saying something about an errand.

The Pandora staff members were evasive. Possibly they were embarrassed at having been caught chatting during work hours by Oz, the next head of the House of Vessalius. However, from inside the group, a voice said, "Um, I was…," and one young man stepped out in front of Oz.

Oz had a good memory, but even he didn't know the names and faces of everyone who worked at Pandora. This man wasn't someone Oz had seen before. The youth looked apologetic.

"…I was showing my coworkers a photograph, and then…"

"A photo? Of who?"

"Uu, y-yes, of my, um…

"It's this." The young man held the photo he had in his hand out to Oz.

The photo showed a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. It looked as if it had just been born.

The baby was being held by a woman with a gentle expression on her face who was probably its mother.

"Woooow, a baby! It's so cute!"

When Oz cheered his approval, eyes sparkling, the young man blushed self-consciously. Hesitantly, he told him that the baby had been born last week. When Oz peppered him with questions, seeming as happy as if it were his own family, the man told him that the baby was a girl, and that they'd decided to name her Mireille.

"Mireille-chan, huh? She's going to be a beauty, I just know it! I mean, look how cute she is already!"

Oz's cheerful reaction seemed to relax the other staff members, and they began talking.

"We were just discussing what we should send to congratulate them."

"We were saying that cute baby clothes might be good, since it's a girl, or that maybe toys would be better."

"From personal experience, I'm telling you they'd probably prefer to get necessities like diapers—"

Oz listened happily to the colleagues' noisy, lively discussion.

This is kinda nice…

Wanting to be a part of that happy atmosphere, Oz said, "Over here!" and raised his hand. "If you don't mind, let me send something, too," he insisted. Immediately, the young man's eyes went wide. Rather than being happy, he waved both hands frantically, seeming embarrassed. "You don't have to go that far," he demurred, but Oz laughed.

"This is something to celebrate, and I want in! Aah, but I'm not sure what to give…"

Oz thought hard. He'd never given anyone a present to congratulate them on a new baby before, and nothing in particular sprang to mind.

Oz's little sister Ada was six years younger than he, and he tried to remember what sort of presents had arrived when she'd been born. However, the glaringly bright and sparkly, ostentatious, custom-made cradle that his super-enthusiastic Uncle Oscar had sent had made such an impact that he couldn't remember anything else.

Ada cried when they tried to put her to bed in that thing, and it ended up going into storage…

"Hrrrrn," Oz groaned, looking obviously troubled. Then one of the members spoke to him:

"Oz-sama, why not give them a ticket saying you'll date their daughter for a day when she grows up?"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeh?!"

The unexpected suggestion startled Oz. The young father was also startled; turning red, he reproached his presumptuous colleague: "Watch what you're saying!" That said, although he'd been surprised and caught

off guard, Oz didn't feel the least bit put out.

"No, I wouldn't mind that at all. …I'm just not sure something like that would be enough…"

As he spoke, beaming, the young man's colleagues cheered.

Then, encouraged by Oz's easy answer, someone said, half-jokingly, "Lucky you! She might just marry into the purple!" At that, someone else said, "You'd better thank your wife for giving you a beauty," and a third person even said, "Invite me to the wedding!"

I didn't promise that much… Oz thought, a little wryly. He wondered, impressed, whether all this excitement was the result of "baby power."

Feeling that it wouldn't be nice to throw cold water on the gathering, Oz just listened, smiling. The young man kept desperately bowing to him and scolding his colleagues for having fun with such a presumptuous topic, but he was the only one. "Please don't pay any attention to them," he said, sounding as if he was at his wits' end.

Oz thought. *She'll be old enough to go on dates in, what, twelve or thirteen…no, fifteen more years, I guess*.

Then the young man continued:

"…By that time, no doubt you'll have a family of your own, Oz-sama."

Those words resonated violently in Oz's heart.

* * *

"

A lover…hmm… Will I have one of those, too, someday? …No, but, in a situation like this… I mean, I've even got the incuse…

Oz stepped into the room, his thoughts wandering around and around.

Just then:

"—Oz!" A voice called him, sharply.

When Oz raised his head, he saw a girl standing arrogantly in the center of the room.

The girl's name was Alice.

Alice was a slight, pretty, black-haired girl who seemed to be about Oz's age. She was actually the B-Rabbit, a Chain feared even in the Abyss. However, for reasons that had nothing to do with that, Alice had been traveling with him ever since they met, and Oz cherished her.

She was fearless and straightforward, and she'd saved his heart many, many times. Just being with Alice seemed to make the world brighter. That was how precious she was to him.

"So you were in my room, huh, Alice?"

Oz hadn't seen her since that morning.

"I was waiting for you. You kept me waiting forever!"

Alice's attitude was so haughty that she seemed to be saying, *What do you mean by making me—ME!—wait?*

She was always this way, and Oz smiled, looking relieved.

"Sorry. I was just wandering around."

"Hmph. Whatever. Never mind that, Oz. I have a 'request' for you."

"A *request*? You do? For me?"

Oz answered her question with more questions, a startled expression on his face. When Alice asked for things, she usually phrased it as an order: "Feed me meat." Even when she didn't, she always spoke to him as if she outranked him. He wasn't sure whether Alice had ever used a word as humble as "request" before.

That said, in contrast to her words, Alice nodded grandly. "Mm-hm!" There was no trace of the humility of someone asking for a favor. She folded her arms boldly, puffed out her chest proudly, and, with an arrogance that practically screamed, *Be grateful that I'm deigning to ask you for something*, she said:

"Oz, make a child with me!"

"……Huh?"

Oz's mind was a perfect blank.

She'd said she had a request, then phrased it as an order as usual, but never mind that. The bigger problem was what she'd said. Alice's words had entered his ears and reached his mind, but he completely and utterly failed to understand them.

A child? By “child,” did she mean a baby, like the one in the photograph he’d just been shown?

Not even possible, Oz thought, with a forced little smile.

There was just no way that Alice would abruptly say, “Make a child with me.”

…Which meant he must have misheard her.

Here Alice actually asked me for something, and I heard wrong. How could I?!

He actually felt remorse: *I’m no good.* He wanted to hear her out properly, and if it was a request he could grant, he wanted to grant it. Oz looked slightly apologetic, but his voice was cheerful and earnest:

“Uh, I’m sorry. What did you just say, Alice?”

“……Mu?” Alice scowled at being answered with a question, but, since there was no help for it, she said it one more time:

“Make a child with me! I mean, we’re making one, Oz!”

Oz found himself abruptly confronted with:

A baby-making declaration, skipping all the preliminary steps

Alice put her hands on her hips, as if to say, *That's a very good question!*, and spoke haughtily:

"Because I realized that, right now, it's what I need most!"

I really don't get it, Alice-san

stood on a witness stand surrounded by a waist-high railing. He was the accused. On his right was the prosecutor's seat, and on his left was his counsel's seat. In front of him, on a slightly higher platform, was the judge's bench, and behind him were rows and rows of gallery seats.

Every seat held an Oz. The seats were filled with Ozes.

"What need is there to hesitate?!"

An Oz in glasses and a suit stood up violently from the prosecutor's seat, hounding the Oz in the witness stand.

Flinching at the force Prosecutor Oz displayed, Oz the accused said:

"B-but I…"

"The defendant considers Alice very important. That is an acknowledged fact!"

At Prosecutor Oz's words, a low murmur went up from the Ozes in the gallery: "That's right." "That's right." "Very true."

Spurred on by the gallery's reaction, Prosecutor Oz continued sharply:

"You think the world of Alice, and she has asked you for a child. Why can't you grant that request?!"

A hum of agreement rose from the gallery.

Oz had been asked for something.

If the request came from Alice— If it was something he could grant, he wanted to give her anything she asked.

Oz had thought that. He'd thought it from the bottom of his heart.

Oz the accused gulped, took one deep breath, clenched his hands into fists and spoke.

In a voice that rang through the court, he said:

"That's right! Alice really is special to me, and I'm really grateful to her, and she's done so much for me I could never completely pay her back… If it's within my power, I want to make every wish Alice has come true!"

"There, you see?! In that case, you should be able to comply!"

Prosecutor Oz pressed Oz the accused triumphantly.

However, his shoulders and back trembling, his eyes tearing up a bit, Oz the accused said, "*But.*

"But, but…"

"No buts, ands, or ifs!"

"*But*, I don't think this is quite what that meaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaans!!"

It was a lament torn straight from his soul. Overwhelmed, the gallery fell silent.

However, Prosecutor Oz didn't even flinch. "It's *exactly* what it means!" He struck the prosecutor's seat.

"The accused has already committed himself! Your Honor, there is no room for objection here. Pronounce the accused—"

"Objection! Wait, please." A voice broke in from the counsel's seat.

Counsel Oz, a slightly more grown-up version of Oz the accused,

stood from his seat.

"I haven't completed my cross-examination yet. Issuing a verdict now would be hasty."

"What are you talking about? We already have the answer!"

Counsel Oz calmly turned aside Prosecutor Oz's sharp words with a shake of his head. Then he left the counsel's seat and slowly walked over to Oz the accused.

"Having a child is a wonderful thing. That said, when doing so, the feelings of both parties are important. Alice is very special to you; that much is true. However, Defendant, are your feelings for Alice romantic ones? Might they not be feelings of affection for a family member?"

"……!" *Uh-huh! Uh-huh!* Oz the accused nodded vehemently.

"Give your answer clearly, in words, please."

"A-Alice is special to me as family!"

"Oooooh!" The Ozes in the gallery buzzed. Then they began whispering to each other: "Well, sure." "Yeah, I guess I knew that." "Mm-hmm." The mood in the court, which had been leaning toward the prosecution, had begun to shift in favor of the defense.

"Objection! He's shifted the focus from the subject at hand!"

Prosecutor Oz roared, striking the prosecutor's seat with a *bang*. He stood, pointing at Oz the accused.

"The question was whether or not the defendant *is able* to fulfill Alice's request. The defendant himself testified that he wants to grant all of Alice's wishes, provided it is within his power to do so! In that case, grant them he should! After all, she was serious enough to actually 'request' it!"

"Uh, y-you could be right… Alice did look pretty serious…"

Pressed hard by Prosecutor Oz's verbal onslaught, Oz the accused came very near to agreeing with him in spite of himself. When he looked over, Judge Oz—who was seated on the dais, a splendid handlebar mustache under his nose—was nodding soberly. Disheartening comments were being bandied about the gallery: "He's got a point." "He hasn't done anything really manly in front of Alice." "She mostly ends up saving *him*, doesn't she?"

"The verdict, Your Honor! Pronounce him guilty and order him to make that child!" In high spirits, Prosecutor Oz looked to the dais.

The court fell silent.

Even as Oz was convinced by Prosecutor Oz's remarks, he couldn't accept them, and the blood drained from his face.

After a long pause, Judge Oz raised his gavel.

Drawing one deep breath, he brought the gavel down on the bench with a loud *clack*.

With every eye in the court on him, in a solemn voice, he said:

“It appears we have our answer. I pronounce the defendant guilty and sentence him to ‘Go make that kid with Alice!’—”

“Wait, Your Honor.” At the very last minute, Counsel Oz raised his voice.

He had interrupted Judge Oz’s sentence, and a commotion rose from the gallery. Prosecutor Oz fixed Counsel Oz with a sharp glare. The eyes that had been focused on Judge Oz turned to Counsel Oz.

Bewildered, Oz the accused also looked at Counsel Oz. Answering him with a nod, Counsel Oz quietly began to speak.

“Your Honor, it’s still too early to hand down a verdict. We’re overlooking one important thing.”

“Preposterous! As if we could have overlooked anything!”

Prosecutor Oz spoke fiercely, but Counsel Oz was unruffled. “No,” he objected.

“We must not forget that, while this is Oz’s problem, at the same time, it is also Alice’s problem. No doubt it’s true that Alice is serious. However, we don’t know how well Alice understands what it is she’s saying so seriously.”

Huh? Oz’s eyes went wide. Counsel Oz continued.

“Much doubt still remains with regard to Alice’s powers of understanding. Here is the proof.”

He held up several photographs of Alice biting, or getting ready to bite, Oz’s and Gilbert’s cheeks. After he’d shown them around the court, Counsel Oz announced a decisive fact:

“She is under the impression that a kiss on the cheek, that simple gesture of affection, is actually a *bite* on the cheek. I can’t imagine that such a girl has a correct understanding of what it means to ‘make a child’! Because, you see, Alice is a simpleton extraordinaire—!!”

At that point, Oz came to with a gasp.

“……Huh? I…”

He sat up on the balcony, looking around curiously. He remembered something falling down and hitting him in the face, and he understood almost immediately that he’d blacked out because of it. However, there was nothing on the balcony.

It was as if nothing had fallen in the first place.

“Hmm?”

Oz was perplexed, but he soon shook his head roughly. *That’s not important!* The dream he’d seen while he was unconscious had been a weird dream—he’d been both denouncing and defending himself—but it had made him realize something important, something he hadn’t noticed in his panic.

That’s right…!

With a silent shout, he leapt to his feet, then ran from the balcony

back into the building. He made a dash for his room.

Alice had keen insight, and she could be terribly quick on the uptake, but sometimes she was a simpleton extraordinaire. She might have spectacularly mistaken "making a child" for something completely different. …Not that he knew what she'd mistaken it for, or how she'd managed it.

Oz reached his room. He flung the door open. Inside, annoyed at being kept waiting, was Alice.

"Oz! How long are you planning to make me wai—"

"Before that, Alice, there's something I want to ask you!"

"…Uh-huh. What?"

Possibly she'd been daunted by Oz's ferocious determination: Alice obeyed easily, and she didn't get mad at having been interrupted.

Gasping for breath, Oz worried over how he should ask, and even as he worried, he asked:

"Um, Alice, listen. D-do you know what 'making a child' means? *Really* know, I mean?"

The subject alone was enough to make Oz's cheeks flush a bit.

With an attitude that practically said, *Don't ask pointless things*, Alice snorted loudly.

"What a stupid question! You think I'd go to the trouble of making a request if I didn't know?"

Even as she said it, Alice's cheeks went slightly pink, and she fidgeted a little.

Oz's heart flipped over.

Looking almost like an embarrassed young lady, Alice said:

"…I-I thought about it properly. I thought, if I was going to make a child, I wanted it to be with you."

"Actually, please give me a little more time!"

With tears in his eyes, Oz ran from the room again.

3

"……! ……!"

Oz dashed through the corridors. The Pandora employees he passed every so often seemed startled at the sight of Oz running, almost in tears. Of course, Oz didn't have the emotional leeway to care about anything around him.

Although there was no rule that said he had to go there, he ended up running out onto the same balcony again. As if pointlessly retracing his actions, he gripped the railing tightly with both hands. *Calm down, calm down, calm down*, he told himself silently, over and over.

Calm down…—I can't*! How could I be calm about this?!*

Oz felt something like vertigo.

He thought he might pass out again, but if he did, he was afraid he'd see the rest of that courtroom dream, and this time, he was sure he'd lose. Oz muttered, talking to himself. Alice had declared that she knew what it meant to make a child.

"I really don't think she does… But she did look as if she knew… I think. But…"

Desperately, he ordered his thoughts. Something had struck him as odd.

Even if it was true that Alice knew, where had she found out? Where had she read about it?

Or…

"Did someone…tell her—?"

At his own quiet mutter, Oz's eyes flew open.

"That's it," he gasped. He wanted to tell himself off. Why hadn't he thought of that possibility!?

Counsel Oz's voice echoed in his mind:

"Yes, well done. I'm glad you noticed that. It's true that Alice knows what it means to make a child, and it's equally true that she isn't trying to tease you. However… It's still possible that someone planted the idea in her head and is having fun teasing you *through* her! Because, you see, she's a good girl who's unexpectedly obedient about believing what she's told—!"

Oz let go of the railing and whirled around. Inside his head, he was repeating, *That's right, that's right, that's right!*

Fiercely, Oz dove back into the building. He pounded through the corridors.

A light of hope had been lit in his chest.

That's right! And I only know one person who'd do a thing like that—

Once again, Oz reached his room. Silently telling himself to calm down, he opened the door.

Inside, Alice was prowling around the room, looking cross.

When she saw Oz, her face grew stern, and she yelled at him:

"What's the matter with you!? First you come back, then you leave… Are you trying to make me mad?!"

"Never mind that, Alice!"

Oz ran up to Alice, caught her by the shoulders, and put his face very close to hers.

Oz was still panting for breath, and he looked desperate. Seeming overwhelmed, Alice leaned back slightly.

Oz thought. In the first place, he couldn't believe that Alice had gotten the idea of "making a child" on her own. In that case, it was appropriate to assume that there was someone else involved.

Oz looked Alice straight in the eye, without blinking.

"Alice, listen. Who told you about this 'making a child' stuff? …It was

Break, wasn't it?"

Right. He couldn't think of anyone else who'd pull a prank like this one.

He probably told her that if she made a child, she'd get a stronger ultimate power or something—

He had no idea what was so much fun about doing things like that, but he was sure that was what had happened.

It had to be that. If it wasn't that, he'd have a serious problem on his hands.

……But.

"Huuuh? Why would you bring up the old clown now? He's got nothing to do with this."

Alice's answer could not have been clearer.

With an even more triumphant look, she continued, proudly:

"When I was in town yesterday, I saw a family with children. It made me want one. —Heh! Oz, did you know? Children are wonderful things. Mm-hm, I want one, too. I want one, no matter what."

In Oz's mind, Counsel Oz had a brisk smile on his face…and a white flag in his hand.

Oz looked down. His shoulders and back quivered. Oz's bangs hid his expression, and Alice couldn't see it.

Trying to peek at Oz's face, Alice moved hers up closer to his…

And then…

"Uu, uu…… Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Oz, pushed to the limit by confusion, bewilderment and an incomprehensible sense of defeat, went to dash from the room yet again. As Oz ran off, Alice threw up her hands in a huff and yelled:

"Oz, would you quit?! You're just a lowly *Oz*! How dare you run from me over and over like that?!"

Of course Oz didn't answer. He couldn't.

As he opened the door and dived through it, he collided with somebody. When he looked up, he saw his valet, Gilbert Nightray.

Gilbert was tall, and Oz's head only came up to his chest.

Gilbert had only just reached the room when his master abruptly came flying into his arms, and he was thoroughly flustered right off the bat. "Wh-what's the matter, Oz?!" he asked, his voice unsteady.

But Oz couldn't answer.

He just barely managed to repeat, "Alice is… Alice is…!" in a choked voice.

Then, leaving only an unfinished "Aliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiice—" behind him, he pushed Gilbert away and ran off. He was sprinting hell-bent for leather. Astonished and left in the dust, Gilbert soon came back to himself with a gasp.

"Oz! Wait!"

Hastily, he rushed after him.

* * *

Gilbert wasn't the only one to set off in pursuit of Oz.

In Oz's room:

"Aaaa

For a short while, they exchanged prickly glances, but then—

"Hmph." Alice turned away first.

"I don't have time to deal with you right now. I'm off."

As she spoke, she made to leave the balcony and go back into the building. Gilbert grabbed her shoulder from behind, stopping her: "… Hold it." Alice turned back, as if he was a royal nuisance. Gilbert's face was serious. "I'm worried about Oz, too, but…" he muttered quietly.

"Oz said, 'Alice is…' What did you do to Oz, stupid rabbit?"

He interrogated Alice with a force that wouldn't allow any evasions. With a snort, Alice looked back at Gilbert with eyes that were just as dangerous as his. She shook off Gilbert's hand, planted her own hands on her hips, and answered grandly, saying she wouldn't run or hide.

"I didn't do anything to him. I just told him."

"'Told him'? Told him what? As if anything you said could upset Oz—"

Gilbert had probably been about to say *like that*.

However, without waiting for him to finish, Alice spoke with a ferocious smile.

"I only told him 'Make a child with me.'"

"……Huh?"

Oddly enough, Gilbert's reaction was exactly the same as Oz's had been the first time he'd heard this request from Alice.

Gilbert's face was blank. He looked as though the inside of his head was pure white. Moving his hand with a stiff, stuttering motion, like a broken machine, Gilbert pointed at Alice, and—again, exactly like Oz—asked, "……What did you just say?"

Having now had two people respond as if they hadn't been listening to her properly, Alice puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction.

"Are you both deaf!? I said I want to make a child with Oz!"

"Why are you talking crazy all of a sudden, rabbit~~~~~~~~~~~~~?!!"

Gilbert grabbed Alice's shirtfront.

"Are you stupid?! No, I know you're stupid, but are you *terminally* stupid?! Do you know what making a kid means? Child-rearing is really tough: It means changing diapers and feeding it milk and giving it baths and staying up all night with it when it cries and cuddling it and saying 'There, there'—and that's not even the problem! Don't you dare say insane stuff to Oz and cause him trouble!"

Gilbert—red-faced, steam spouting from his head, eyes whirling—scolded Alice.

Alice, who'd been yanked into the air by her shirtfront, drew her brows together in displeasure.

"Shut up!"

She rammed her forehead into Gilbert's and shook his hand off. "Hmph," she huffed, straightening her rumpled shirt.

Gilbert looked at Alice. He had a hand to his forehead, and he seemed dizzy.

Alice folded her arms, striking a grand pose.

"'Stupid stupid stupid stupid'… Is that the only word you know, you low-watt seaweed head!? I am always serious, and I always mean what I say!" she said with a flourish.

Overwhelmed by that overpowering, self-confident force, Gilbert was aghast. Holding his forehead, which had gone red, he thought, dazedly, *Is she nuts?* At Gilbert's silence, Alice smiled triumphantly, gloating: "Ha-haaaa."

Gilbert spoke.

"……Why…do you want a kid? Do you want to……to marry Oz?!"

He seemed absolutely unconvinced, as if he didn't even think he *could* accept it.

"Marry…?" Alice murmured. Her face softened slightly. Her expression was so fragile and gentle that Gilbert was almost won over in spite of himself. For a little while, Alice seemed to think. Then she answered:

"What's this 'marry' business? Can you eat it?"

"Huh?!" said Gilbert.

"Well, if it's edible, I'll eat that, too."

Alice looked as if her curiosity had been piqued; her nostrils were twitching. Gilbert hung his head silently, as though he was getting a headache. Then, as if something had caught his attention, he muttered, "……That 'too'?" Stiffly, he raised his head.

"Answer me, stupid rabbit. What do you want a kid *for* in the first place?"

"Hah! That's obvious."

Alice looked down her nose at Gilbert: *Don't you even know* that, *you fool!?* Then, with an attitude of complete condescension, as if saying, *I suppose there's no help for it. I'll make an exception and tell you*, she answered:

"Heh-heh-heh…… Obviously. Because I want to eat delicious things. Why else?"

"……!?"

Gilbert was dumbfounded. It was as if he'd abruptly taken another hit to the head.

He shook his head, wondering if he'd heard her wrong. However, Gilbert had definitely heard what Alice had said. She wanted a child so she could eat it.

Pandora had confirmed the existence of Chains that devoured humans. However, Gilbert had never thought he'd hear those words

come from Alice's mouth.

It was true that Alice was the B-Rabbit, a vicious Chain that other Chains feared.

Lately, he'd only been exposed to her greedy, stupid-rabbit aspect, so he kept forgetting, but…

Did this mean Alice was revealing her true nature as a Chain?

With cold sweat breaking out on his forehead, Gilbert spoke:

"Enough joking around. To…eat? Are you serious!?"

"You forgot 'deliciously.' That part's important. If it's Oz's child, I bet I'll experience flavor like never before!

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha-haaah!" As Alice laughed, exhilarated, she looked like the devil himself.

Gulping, Gilbert barred Alice's way. In a low voice, he muttered, "……I won't let you."

Alice only gave a dangerous-sounding sigh: "Hoh…

"You're going to get in my way?—You…you lowly marine product?"

"Of course I am! As if anyone would let you do that! Think again, you stupid rabbit."

"I will not! No one—but *no one*—gets between me and my meals."

Alice widened her stance slightly, dropping her hips. It was the stance of a carnivore about to leap at its prey, a stance that said, *Maybe I'll eat you, too.* Even as Gilbert felt baffled, he told Alice off, anger clear in his voice.

"And anyway, you know there's no way Oz would agree to that…that ridiculous demand!"

"Why you… Are you mocking my lofty ambition?!"

Alice's eyes were growing colder, sharper, and more dangerous. However, Gilbert didn't care.

"What's lofty about it?! …I thought you were a halfway decent sort… someone I wouldn't mind acknowledging, and yet you—! So, what, does this mean Chains and humans are fundamentally unable to coexist?!"

"Interesting! Now that you've gone that far, I expect you're prepared, right!?"

A savage smile burst onto her face, and Alice launched herself.

In an instant, she'd landed right in front of Gilbert, leaned back into a midair somersault, and unleashed a kick. Her target was Gilbert's chin.

However, at the last second, Gilbert twisted and evaded it. The toe of Alice's boot grazed his cheek, drawing a red line. "Oho, you dodged that!" Alice laughed loudly. As she touched down, she switched directions and came at Gilbert again.

"Tch!" Gilbert clicked his tongue and stretched out an arm to capture Alice. Alice struck it aside with her hand and cut loose with a roundhouse kick. Realizing he wouldn't be able to dodge this one, Gilbert intentionally took the kick in his side, then trapped her leg.

Just as he was about to take her down and pin her to the floor, Alice's

free leg aimed a kick at Gilbert's temple. There was really no way he could let that one hit home; Gilbert dropped the leg he'd caught and leaned back, avoiding the kick.

"Hah! And here I thought all you could do was shoot a gun. Not bad, Raven!" Alice sounded elated, delighted.

"Just calm down, B-Rabbit!"

Gilbert's anger was boiling over. However, Alice didn't seem to care what he said, and she launched another kick.

Gilbert dodged that kick, but on taking the follow-up volley of knees and legs that Alice rained down on him, he reflexively drew his gun from inside his coat. He didn't intend to shoot, of course. He'd only thought the threat might serve to cool Alice's head. But—

Alice's face wore a taunting smile: *Go on. Shoot.*

The air between them grew tenser and harder.

Finally, just as it reached its limit, and a cat's small "mew" was heard somewhere in the distance…

"Hah!" Alice gave a scornful laugh and charged him head-on, and Gilbert spat out, "You complete idiot—" His fingers tightened on the grip of his gun.

The two of them screamed at the same moment.

"Stupid rabbit! Don't be rash! You're not eating a baby!"

"Seaweed head! I just want to eat yummy grilled pork skewers!"

And then…

"……Huh?"

The two stopped in their tracks, staring at each other.

5

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah……"

Oz heaved a long, long sigh. He was sitting at the foot of an elm tree in the courtyard at Pandora Headquarters, leaning back against the trunk, his legs flung out in front of him. The soft light that filtered through the leaves dappled his clothes.

I can't believe I panicked and ran away from Alice…… I'm the worst.

Remorse weighed on him so heavily he felt as if he might sink deep into the earth. He'd considered himself to be calm and collected under most circumstances, and he didn't think he was slow-witted. He couldn't believe he'd been thrown into confusion so easily, just because someone had told him they wanted to "make a child."

No, well, I just…… I mean, I can't even imagine it…

He'd been startled and upset, and he hadn't known what to do. No, that wasn't right: He knew exactly what he had to do.

He couldn't grant Alice's request. That was all there was to it.

Uwaaah… Am I a complete failure as a guy…?

Oz had lost all self-confidence.

Without really meaning to, he curled up, hugging his knees and burying his face in them. What should he say to Alice? How should he apologize? The thoughts went around and around in his head, but no answer presented itself. He tightened his arms around his knees, curling up even smaller.

It was as if he hoped he'd keep getting smaller and smaller until he disappeared.

—*Lick.*

As Oz sat there, hiding his face and hugging his knees, something licked his fingers lightly. "???" Oz raised his head.

A familiar white cat was sitting demurely on the grass, licking Oz's hand.

It seemed almost as if it was trying to comfort him.

"Hey, you're Snowdrop…… What're you doing here?"

The cat was always with Oz's little sister Ada, and he thought it was odd to see it at Pandora Headquarters. Was Ada here? As Oz looked around curiously, he saw two figures enter the courtyard from the building. Oz's shoulders shook slightly.

It was Alice and Gilbert.

When Gilbert caught sight of Oz, he called to him. His voice held both relief and worry: "Oz!" Gilbert was holding Alice by the scruff of her neck, as if she were a cat, and Alice was struggling. "Lemme go!"

"—So that's where you were, Oz. I looked all over for you."

Coming right up to Oz, Gilbert broke into a relieved smile. Alice was trying to shake off his hand; crossly, she said, "It's not my fault!" Oz could only watch, perplexed; he didn't know why Gilbert was doing that.

"Don't worry, Oz. It was all a misunderstanding. All of it."

"…A misunderstanding?"

Gilbert's words left Oz as perplexed as before.

"Right, see…" Gilbert began to explain, but then stopped. He pushed Alice's head toward Oz.

"Explain it yourself," he told her. Alice looked blank. "Explain what?"

This irritated Gilbert.

"Why you suddenly started saying you wanted a kid!"

"Ah, that." Looking as though it all made sense now, Alice glanced at Oz.

Alice had already told Oz that the reason she wanted a child was because, right now, it was what she needed most, but—

Alice shook off Gilbert's hand, puffing her chest out proudly.

"I already told you! Because I want to eat delicious things!"

"To eat……?! *Gack, koff!*" Oz was so startled that he choked.

Gilbert smacked Alice upside the head. Alice complained—"Quit hitting my head!"—and then gave a little growl. Oz had no idea what was going on.

With a resigned sigh, Gilbert said:

"Forget it. I'll explain. It's going to take a while, but hear me out, Oz."

Oz nodded. Snowdrop, the white cat, clambered up onto his knees, so he hugged it to his chest as he listened to Gilbert.

Gilbert began to speak, relaying what Alice had told him about "yesterday."

Yesterday, Oz, Gilbert, and Alice had gone into town together. However, just after they'd reached the town, Alice had wandered off, and they hadn't seen her again for a little while…

During that time, Alice had walked around town on her own, and she'd ended up rescuing a young man from one of the street stalls who was being harassed by a gang of toughs. "Rescued" might not have been quite the right word—apparently the toughs had tried to harass Alice, too, so she'd casually knocked them out cold—but at any rate, the young man had been terribly grateful.

In thanks, the youth had treated Alice to one of the skewers of grilled pork he sold at his stall. According to Alice, she'd enjoyed it.

At that point, Oz had absolutely no idea how this story was connected to making children.

Telling him that the next part was the problem, Gilbert continued.

As Alice was eating her pork skewer, new customers arrived: a family with children. The family bought the same sort of pork skewers Alice had and sat on the bench beside the stall to eat them. Alice said the flavor of the grilled skewers had been only so-so, but apparently the family with children had eaten theirs with delight, as if they were the best things they'd ever tasted.

Finding the situation odd, Alice asked them directly, not bothering to choose her words carefully:

"Hey, you. Are those pork skewers actually that good?"

The family looked a bit startled at having been spoken to so abruptly, but the mother smiled and answered. *"Yes, they're very good,"* she'd said.

"…And then the mother said *this* to the stupid rabbit."

Gilbert pulled a very sour face.

To wind up the story, he relayed the mother's remark—which had been overflowing with affection, and had become the cause of all this trouble—to Oz.

"'Food you eat with your children seems many times better,' she said."

"Isn't that amazing, Oz?! Many *times* better!" Alice was terribly excited.

She clenched both her hands into fists and leaned in toward Oz, eyes

sparkling. Oz was speechless.

Gilbert scratched his head, looking disgusted by Alice's attitude.

"……Um, Alice-san?"

In contrast to Alice, who kept repeating "Amazing, amazing," Oz was silent for a long time, but he finally managed to squeeze out a few words. Alice looked at him: "What?"

"When you talked about making a child, was that maybe—?"

"So meat would taste many times better, obviously! What else could it have been?!"

Alice puffed out her chest with an attitude that seemed to say, *The world revolves around me!* Once again, Oz's words deserted him. As Oz sat in silence, Gilbert watched him worriedly.

Failing to notice Oz's appearance, Alice said that, when she'd told the mother she was going to make children, too, the mother had asked if she had someone to help her do that. When Alice answered that she had a servant who could be ordered to do anything, the woman had given a strained little smile and asked her a question: *"Do you love that person?"*

Then the mother had said this to Alice as well:

"If you're going to make children, you should choose the person you'd most like to eat your meals with as your partner."

"I don't understand the 'love' bit, but…I gave it some thought, too."

At that point, Alice faltered, but then she continued:

"…I thought, well, if I had to pick someone to eat with, you'd probably be best, Oz."

As she spoke, she blushed slightly.

Oh—

At the sight of that expression, something clicked inside Oz. It was the same expression Alice had had in the room earlier, when he'd asked her if she really knew what making a child meant.

Possibly in an attempt to hide her embarrassment, Alice's expression grew a bit irritated.

"That's not all. The lady said something uncalled for, too. She said if my partner didn't want to, I mustn't force him. She said children I made that way wouldn't make food taste better at all. She said it was okay to 'request' that you do it, but—What a total nuisance!"

I see. Everything made sense to Oz now. That was why Alice had uncharacteristically phrased it in the form of a request.

This cleared up all the mysteries.

Oz's lips moved: *Was* that *what it was?* He was actually smiling, faintly.

Oh, man…

He felt like an idiot for worrying about it seriously. It was hopelessly ridiculous. He was going to laugh. He couldn't possibly *not* laugh. "Heh-heh-heh…" His head was still down, and Oz's shoulders were shaking. Flustered, Gilbert asked, "Wh-what is it?!"

Oz didn't respond.

Oh, man. Oh, man. Oh, man…

His internal voice held a mixture of amazement and disgust, and it didn't continue past "Oh, man." And then, abruptly, Oz tossed the white cat aside and leapt to his feet.

Then he made a great proclamation:

"Well, okay! Let's do it, Alice! Let's make our kid!"

"*Eeeeeeeeeh?!*" Gilbert was horribly disturbed.

Alice romped around ecstatically. “Yes, let’s, let’s!”

“Wh-wh-wh-what are you saying, Oz?! Calm down!”

Gilbert had gone white as a sheet. He tried to stop Oz, but Oz ignored him. Waving his hands around, he cried:

“While we’re at it, let’s make lots! If just one makes things taste many times better, I bet several of them will make things taste *dozens* of times better, Alice! It’ll be fine! Gil will help us take care of them, right, Gil?! Okay, why don’t we go all out and make ten or so?! Hah hah haaaaaaah!!”

“Oz…… Did something snap……?!” Gilbert was panicking.

“*Dozens* of times! That’s *amazing*, Oz!”

As Alice looked jubilant, Oz punched a fist up into the sky.

With a brilliant, slightly hysterical smile, he yelled:

“We’ll have the biggest family in the world

A SIDE EPISODE OF HELLO BABY
LISTEN UP, STUPID RABBIT.
CHILDREN AREN'T THAT EASY TO MAKE.
FROM WHAT I HEAR, ONCE A YEAR, A DRAGON COMES DOWN FROM THE SKY AND DELIVERS BABIES TO A SELECT HANDFUL OF PEOPLE...
GYAASU (SHREE)
SO...IF I GET THAT DRAGON TO LIKE ME, I'LL GET A BABY!?
RAVEN! HOW DO I DO THAT!?
WOW!
BURU (BRR)
I HEAR IT WON'T GO NEAR FOUL-MOUTHED PEOPLE EITHER, SO YOU'LL HAVE TO STOP CALLING PEOPLE RUDE NAMES LIKE SEAWEED HEAD, AND—
HEY, HEY, HEY. GILBERT?
THEY SAY THE DRAGON DOESN'T LIKE VIOLENCE, SO YOU'D BETTER NOT KICK OZ AGAIN, EVER.
IT ALSO HATES PEOPLE WHO DON'T EAT THEIR VEGETABLES.

BOOK: A GENTLE PRIMER FOR CHILDREN, HEALTH AND P. E.

The Story
of
Brothers

LUCKY DAY

Destiny's Scales

* *

Your luck is off the charts today!
Everything you make or do will go well, and not a single bad thing will happen.
On a day like this, it might be good to attempt something you don't usually do.
Lucky item: Hat
Lucky color: Black
Lucky food: Black tea
Lucky place: Your family home, which you'll visit for the first time in a while.

* *

—From the divination corner in this morning's newspaper

1

When he woke that morning, he had a crick in his neck.

When he got out of bed, he stepped on a glass that was lying on the floor and fell down. The glass broke, and he cut the sole of his foot on the shards. When he got out the first-aid box to tend to the wound, he discovered he was out of ointment. With no better options, he wrapped it in plain gauze.

He looked in the mirror and tried to fix his cowlicks, but—today of all days—none of them got the least bit better.

When he drank his tea at breakfast, he accidentally put in salt instead of sugar: The containers had been in each other's usual place.

After that, when he was walking across the courtyard at Pandora Headquarters, a swallow pooped on him from far up in the sky.

On top of that, the odd-jobs man who was tending the potted plants on the second-story balcony accidentally dropped the watering can, and the water splashed down right over him. On top of *that*, as he was on his way back to his room to change clothes, he bumped into a Pandora staff member, his hat fell off, and the other man stepped on it.

The hat-stomper hadn't meant any harm, and he apologized frantically, so of course he forgave him.

It was his precious hat, given to him by a special person.

As he held his hat—his soaking wet, pooped-on, stomped-on hat—he couldn't help but think a certain thought.

Although he'd only been awake for a few hours…

Gilbert Nightray felt compelled to mutter it to himself, silently:

"This is not my lucky day…"

Then. After lunch.

As if fate was trying to finish him off, he received a summons from the Nightray manor, his family home.

The business they'd summoned him for was trivial, and the matter was dealt with quickly.

Gilbert's room had been left just as it was ever since he moved out of the main Nightray residence. They'd only wanted to ask him what should be done with it in the future.

Gilbert had told them to do whatever they liked with everything in it, that he left it entirely in their hands. He also wished they wouldn't summon him over little things like that, but he didn't say it. Saying it would only have earned him more scoldings and nastiness from his adoptive father and older siblings.

He wanted to get back to Pandora Headquarters, and to his master, quickly.

I can't breathe… This house is seriously uncomfortable.

Ever since he'd started living on his own, he'd kept away from the main house as much as possible. After he'd finished his discussion with his adoptive father and siblings, Gilbert left the drawing room and walked down the corridor at a smart clip. It was almost as if he was saying he didn't want to run into any other members of the Nightray family.

He hoped this senseless summons would be his last bit of bad luck.

…But.

But.

"……Phew."

After he'd walked briskly down the long corridor, descended the great staircase, and arrived in the entry hall, Gilbert gave a small sigh of relief and slowed his pace. In front of him was a set of imposing double doors. Once he was through those, he'd be released from this oppressive mood.

"Gil, you came…"

Suddenly, from directly behind him, a voice spoke. Gilbert flinched violently.

It was a familiar voice. Its owner was…not the person he least wanted to meet, exactly, but the one who required the most nervous energy and the best mental preparations to deal with. The voice belonged to someone he absolutely did not want to meet this way: in the worst way possible, mere moments before he left the main residence as if he was running away.

It was his little brother's voice.

Gilbert whirled around as if he'd been stung.

"……Oh, uh, Vince—"

His agitation and embarrassment made the turn an exaggerated one.

Gilbert twisted, arms flailing, turning back. The next instant, one of his arms struck something hard. Vincent Nightray—Gilbert's full brother, just one year younger than he was—had been standing directly behind him, holding something to his chest: an old-fashioned vase. Gilbert's arm sent this vase flying through the air.

"Ah." Vincent's lips moved. His mismatched eyes—one gold, one wine red—widened slightly.

"Eh?" Gilbert's lips moved. His eyes followed the vase's journey to the floor.

With an ear-splitting *craaaaaaaash*, the vase shattered. …Then there

was silence.

For a moment, Gilbert didn't understand what had happened. Confused, he looked from the shards scattered across the floor to Vincent, then back, several times. A faint smile crept onto Vincent's drowsy face. "I happened to see you, so I spoke to you…" he said.

He'd stopped by the main residence, but had been attempting to leave without seeing his brother, and as he'd turned around, he'd broken the vase. These two things got muddled together in Gilbert's mind, and he couldn't order his words well.

"I, uh, they summoned me. —Sorry. I broke that…

"I'm sorry," he apologized, his voice unsteady.

"And which one might you be apologizing for…?"

Vincent smiled, as if he'd seen right through Gilbert's anguish.

"…Both of them."

It was the only answer Gilbert could give.

Vincent averted his eyes from Gilbert, looking down at the fragments of the vase. His face was expressionless; it even held traces of cruelty, as though he felt contempt for the vase. His delicate lips moved: "I see…" Then, with his eyes still on the shards, Vincent continued:

"You're probably busy, Gil. I'm sure you have to return quickly…"

At those considerate words, Gilbert felt a bit relieved.

"So you see…I don't really mind that you were going to leave without saying hello to me."

"Thank you for saying th—"

"That vase wasn't terribly valuable, either…"

His brother's words left Gilbert even more relieved.

"Only…someone special gave it to me, and it was very, very important…"

Vincent lifted his gaze from the fragments and looked at Gilbert.

The cruelty had disappeared from his expression. Looking gentle, ephemeral, and vaguely entertained, Vincent said:

"Could we talk in my room for a little while, Nii-san…?"

There was no way Gilbert could refuse.

2

Even though it was still day, the curtains in Vincent's room were closed.

On the table, the flames of a candelabra flickered. *In this room alone*, Gilbert thought, *it might as well be night.*

The room was littered with broken dolls. Dolls that had had their arms and legs amputated with scissors; dolls whose torsos had been ripped open and the stuffing pulled out. Apparently his brother's bad habit of cutting up dolls for fun was alive and well.

When he entered the room, he just stood there with the door at his back until Vincent prompted him: “Sit down.”

Vincent stretched out on one of two facing sofas, pointing to the other with a languid gesture.

With a small nod, Gilbert sat down on the edge of the sofa. He didn’t plan to stay long. Just until Vincent had said what he wanted to say.

When he saw that Gilbert had obediently taken a seat on the sofa, Vincent gave a faint smile.

Then he said a woman’s full name.

Even Gilbert had heard the family name. It belonged to a noble house that was influential in social circles.

“Her father favors the Nightrays, you see… From what I hear, Father is also somewhat in his debt. The young lady seems to have taken quite a liking to me… The vase you broke was a gift from her.”

“—I’m sorry.” Gilbert bowed his head conscientiously.

“Don’t worry about it… I wouldn’t get angry over anything you did, Gil. Only…I don’t know what she’ll think.”

Vincent furrowed his brow in concern.

“She’s asked me to see her socially many times… I’d rather not, so I turn her down, but… Considering the relationship between her family and the Nightrays, I can’t treat her coldly, so I accept her presents, at least. And you see…whenever her father brings her to visit, she checks. She makes sure her presents aren’t being treated badly…”

As he listened, tormented by guilt and remorse, Gilbert thought.

At first he’d wondered whether his little brother had acquired a “special lady-friend,” but apparently that wasn’t the case. He thought it was likely that both the “special someone” and the “important vase” were special and important, not to his brother personally, but to the Nightray family.

In that case, this wasn’t something he could resolve with an apology to Vincent.

“I’m sorry,” Gilbert said, bowing again.

“I’ll apologize to the lady and her father, Vince. I’ll tell them I broke the vase, and that you weren’t to blame—”

“An apology is all they’ll require of you, but…”

Vincent’s words held the implication that that really wouldn’t be enough to resolve things.

For an instant, the idea of finding and purchasing something identical floated into Gilbert’s mind, but he banished it immediately.

In matters between two noble houses, such deception was not countenanced.

“…What should I do?” Gilbert looked wretched. At the question, Vincent sat up, glanced at Gilbert, and smiled softly.

“You don’t have to do anything, Gil… If I comply with one or two of her requests for dates, she’ll probably cheer up. I’ll just have to endure

for a little while, that's all…"

"Vince…" Aside from calling his brother's name, Gilbert could do nothing.

The room was as gloomy as night, and for a while, it was filled with the sort of silence that came in the small hours of the morning, when everyone was fast asleep.

At length:

"…What should I do? For you, I mean."

Gilbert repeated the words he'd spoken before, with a brief addition. Even if Vincent told him not to worry about it, and that he didn't have to do anything, he knew he did. As an older brother, how should he compensate his little brother for the unnecessary burden his mistake had forced on him?

In response to Gilbert's earnest question, Vincent said, "You're so serious, Gil…" He smiled. "Really, there's no need to worry about it… But, in that case, I might make one request…"

"A request?" Gilbert's eyebrows drew together, dubiously.

Vincent laughed and nodded, adding that, although it might be a request, it was quite simple and nothing important.

Gilbert brooded slightly. Then, as if he'd made up his mind:

"If that's what you want. What is it?"

"It's really very simple… Once in a while, I'd like *you* to hug *me* tightly…!"

"'Hug'?!"

In spite of himself, Gilbert froze up. The request had been both abrupt and unexpected.

It was true that, for years now—no, for as far back as he could remember—although Vincent had touched him, he'd never touched Vincent.

It had been that way ever since he met Vincent at the Nightray manor, almost ten years ago. Gilbert had lost nearly all memories of his childhood, and he'd been so confused by this "little brother" who'd been abruptly set in front of him that he hadn't been able to move. In contrast, no sooner had Vincent seen his big brother than he'd run up to him and hugged him.

And so it had gone.

Even afterward.

That relationship continued to this day. He was overwhelmed and flustered by his brother, who always cut in first and showered him with an excess of affection. Behind that smile, it was hard to tell what he was feeling, what he was thinking, and Gilbert hesitated to approach him.

However, it wasn't as if Gilbert hated his brother.

W-well, a hug isn't much to ask—

He'd been startled, and he was a bit nervous, but if that would console his brother, it certainly was a simple thing.

Gilbert nodded.

"All ri—"

Just as he was on the verge of saying *All right* and getting up from the sofa…

"Heh-heh…"

He froze, startled by the little smile on Vincent's face. A warning signal raced through his mind. Yes, a hug wasn't much to ask. However, the sheer simplicity of it provoked misgivings. Frozen halfway to his feet, Gilbert questioned himself. His eyes widened slightly.

A hug… Is that really going to be the end of it?!

Would his brother really release him for a mere hug? What was he really trying to do, or trying to make him do? What was lurking beyond that hug?

Gilbert didn't know what his brother was thinking. Since he didn't know, he couldn't help but feel wary. He probably wouldn't get eaten. Even so, Gilbert felt like an insect being lured by the scent of a carnivorous plant.

He couldn't budge from his awkward, half-finished position.

"What's the matter…?" Vincent asked, tilting his head to one side.

Gilbert was as unresponsive as a statue.

"Can't you do it, Gil…?"

Gilbert didn't react. A storm of uncertainty raged inside his head. Finally:

"…It's not…that I can't, but…" He'd spoken as if squeezing the words out, and he sat back down on the sofa.

He couldn't look Vincent in the face. He turned aside, hesitantly asking him if he could change his request to something else.

"I see. That's a pity…"

However, from Vincent's expression, he wasn't sorry at all. His brother's reaction seemed to make him happy. His expression was that of someone admiring something beloved from the bottom of his heart; he even seemed to welcome his brother's wariness of him. "In that case…" Vincent said, changing tactics easily:

"Come…Echo."

When he murmured to no one in particular, a cold voice spoke—"Yes, sir."—although there didn't seem to be anyone besides the two of them in the room. In the same moment, a slight shadow slipped lightly out from behind the sofa where Gilbert was sitting. The shape leapt over Gilbert's head to land on the floor. It was a girl.

The girl was standing with her back to Gilbert. He'd never properly met or spoken to her, but Gilbert did know of her. Her name was Echo. He was fairly sure she was his brother's valet, or something of the sort.

Echo bowed to Vincent, then spun to face Gilbert. Wordlessly, she bowed her head. In combination with her perfectly blank expression, it made her look just like a doll.

Gilbert wondered if Echo had been in the room the whole time, behind the sofa. If she had been, had she overheard his exchange with his brother? However, he couldn't read any emotion from Echo. She simply stood there.

Silently, Echo watched Gilbert with steady eyes. He didn't know what he should say to her.

"Gil…"

Vincent spoke sleepily from the sofa beyond Echo.

"Would you make Echo smile for me…?"

Gilbert blinked. He mulled Vincent's words over in his mind, then repeated them.

"—Make her laugh?"

"That's right. The child hasn't smiled in ages, you see… I was just thinking I'd like to see it…"

"She hasn't smiled—"

"No tickling allowed… I doubt it would work anyway."

Even as Echo listened to them talking about her right over her head, she only watched Gilbert, silently. Her face held no emotion whatsoever.

"Rrgh," Gilbert groaned. He thought. It was easy to say "Make her smile," but his master and Break were always telling him he didn't have the knack for comedy. He'd always thought he didn't need a knack like that. He'd never imagined it would prove necessary at a time like this.

Still, he had to do it. It was partially due to his feeling of responsibility over breaking the vase, but even more than that:

That's right… I…

When he'd left Pandora Headquarters, he'd told Oz he'd be right back.

He couldn't break that promise, a promise made to his master, so easily. He had to do what he was here to do quickly and return.

Tightening his lower abdomen, Gilbert looked at Echo, his eyes filling with resolve and determination.

"

Her voice was perfectly detached, like a doll's. As Gilbert sat speechless, she continued:

"Echo hasn't laughed once since she was born. She doesn't even know what it means to laugh."

"Oh, that's right, isn't it, Echo…"

Vincent spoke as if it had slipped his mind.

"Correct. It isn't necessary for Echo."

I can't

When night fell, his brother would say those words, stand up, and go into town. They'd never had a satisfying meal. They didn't have money to buy the raw ingredients, and when his brother said he was going to go find food, it meant he'd either beg somebody for it or steal it.

If his big brother went into town and didn't come back, he'd be free. All he had to do to find release was abandon his little brother. If he'd done it, not a soul would have blamed him for it. After all, the little brother was a child of ill omen. There really shouldn't have been any reason for him not to do it.

But, whenever he left him, his brother always said:

"Don't worry. I won't go anywhere."

He'd hold his little brother's hand, and sometimes he'd hug him, tightly, tightly, as if to reassure him.

Those words were a knife.

4

"I-in a certain village, there lived a farmer."

Even as he was tormented by a sense of despair, Gilbert began to speak. He was telling a funny little story he'd heard from somebody, a long time ago.

I'm pretty sure Oz roared with laughter when we heard this one…

Echo simply stood there. From her cold face, it was impossible to tell whether she was listening or not. Behind her, lying on the sofa, as he watched Gilbert talk with sweat breaking out on his forehead, Vincent was giggling.

Gilbert spoke with everything he had, reeling in the thread of his memories.

"That farmer had a friend. The friend had just been wed, and he and his wife lived happily in a cottage on the edge of the village. One day, as the farmer left to till the fields, he saw his friend and his friend's wife walking toward him. The farmer was surprised. After all, the couple had vegetables in their mouths, and they were walking on their hands. So the farmer asked them, 'Why are you two walking on your hands with vegetables in your mouths?' At that, the two smiled and answered: 'Obviously—'"

At that point, Gilbert's story trailed off. All that was left was the couple's answer, the punch line of the joke.

Echo was watching Gilbert, steadily. Vincent gave a small yawn.

The room was filled with a suffocating silence.

"A-at that, the two smiled and answered: 'Obviously—'…"

He didn't go beyond that point. Sweat rolled off Gilbert's brow.

Indifferently, Echo opened her mouth:

"What is the punch line?"

"……"

Gilbert's lips worked several times, attempting to finish the story, but in the end, the words wouldn't come.

His shoulders sagged.

"…I forget."

"*Snrk!*" Vincent burst out laughing.

Echo's face held neither disgust nor irritation, and she didn't even change her position. She only said, "I see. That's unfortunate." And then:

"It isn't funny at all."

She hit Gilbert with a dispassionate final blow.

The room was filled with a bleak, chilly atmosphere. Echo stood like a doll, and Gilbert had been plunged into depression. Only Vincent snickered cheerfully to himself. When he asked, "Do you surrender, Gil…?" Gilbert nodded weakly.

He felt as if all the broken dolls scattered around the room were sneering at him.

"A-ask for…something else," Gilbert managed, with difficulty. "Please."

Vincent answered, "Sure," quite easily.

"It looks as if that was…a bit too hard for you, Gil. All right…Echo."

"Yes, Vincent-sama."

Echo spun, turning her back to Gilbert, and answered Vincent.

"Would you get it ready for me? The chessboard…"

At Vincent's order, Echo nodded and began busily moving about the room.

A small table was promptly set up right in front of Gilbert, between the two facing sofas where he and Vincent sat. A chessboard was placed on top of it, and the pieces lined up on the board.

Chess—?

Gilbert just watched the pieces being lined up on the chessboard, separated into ranks of black and white.

In front of him, on his side, were the black pieces, and beyond them, on Vincent's side, were the white pieces.

When the preparations were complete, Echo went to stand behind the sofa where Vincent lay. Vincent sat up, reseating himself on the sofa, and picked up one of the pieces. As he toyed with the piece in his hand, he turned to Gilbert with a teasing smile.

"All right, this one really is a simple request… Be my chess partner…"

Gilbert did know the rules of chess.

When he'd lived at the Nightray manor, he'd played Vincent several times. They'd learned the rules at the same time, but possibly Vincent had had a talent for it; he'd improved rapidly, and Gilbert had never

beaten him.

However, if all he had to do was be his chess partner… If it didn't matter whether he won or lost…

"All I have to do is play chess with you?"

"Of course… I won't say I won't let it count as payment for the vase if you don't win. Oh, but…"

"B-but?"

As his brother prepared to add a condition, Gilbert felt something ominous. What was he about to be told? He was sure it wouldn't be anything good. For example, "But you have to make your moves while standing on your head." Something like that would be physically impossible.

Instead of finishing his sentence immediately, Vincent got up from the sofa. Skirting the table that held the chessboard, he approached Gilbert.

Gently, he looked down at Gilbert where he sat.

"Vince…?"

When Gilbert spoke to him, questioningly, Vincent put a hand into his breast pocket.

Then—

"Wear *these* when you play…"

Clink.

Quickly, he fastened the shiny, black iron manacles he'd pulled out of his breast pocket around Gilbert's wrists. "Wha—?!" Gilbert gave a shrill, nervous cry and looked down at his manacled hands. The chain that ran between the two cuffs clinked.

Gilbert looked up at Vincent with eyes that held a mixture of shock and bewilderment.

"Vince! What *is* this?!"

"What are they…? Manacles… Can't you tell by looking…?"

"That's not what I meant!"

Gilbert had absolutely no idea what point there was in making him play chess while manacled.

However, looking satisfied, Vincent returned to the sofa where he'd been reclining.

As he sat back down on the sofa, he spoke, sounding entertained:

"They suit you very well, Gil… You, who's trapped by the chain of 'loyalty to your master'…"

"

anyway…" he managed. He sounded disgusted.

"Why do you even *have* these? What lousy taste…"

"They were a present. Apparently they're used rather frequently among the nobility."

"Used…? For what?"

He didn't get it. As Gilbert cocked his head, perplexed, Vincent spoke, his expression cheerful and twinkling:

"I think it's probably better if you don't know, Gil…"

"

"—I can't. I can't play chess."

Gilbert answered immediately. He looked Vincent squarely in the face.

He'd answered without any hesitation, and Vincent seemed slightly mystified. Then he giggled.

"It's all right, I won't tell anyone. He'll never know what you said here…"

"That's not the problem."

Again, he answered without pausing for even a few seconds. Gilbert's voice and expression were resolute. Then he added, "Ask for something else, Vince." "Well, well…" Vincent murmured.

"Such integrity… You think a lot of your master, don't you, Gil… Ah, or else…"

Still smiling, Vincent reached out toward the chessboard and continued:

"Could it be you don't think you can win, even with this many pieces gone…?"

"It's not about winning or losing. Besides, even if I lost, I wouldn't say it."

Gilbert's voice was stubborn. "Hmm…" Vincent said. It wasn't possible to read any emotion in his response.

Then:

"In that case—"

Only two of the white army's pieces remained on the chessboard. Vincent picked up one of them, the queen, and threw it onto the floor. Then, in tones of exaggerated kindness, he pointed out that the king was the only piece he had left.

In chess, the player whose king is taken loses. The white king no longer had any pieces to protect it.

"All you have to do is win, Gil… See? With a setup like this, you have an overwhelming advantage…"

His little brother was beaming at him, but Gilbert said, "No, that's not it," and shook his head in refusal. Then:

"Betting my master in a game in the first place—that would be true betrayal."

And so he couldn't accept this chess match.

No matter what.

At Gilbert's words, Vincent fell silent. His smile disappeared, and his face grew cold and expressionless. However, that lack of expression held a shadow. Some sort of venomous emotion seemed to lurk behind it.

"Heh-heh, honestly…"

But Vincent soon changed completely, breaking into a gentle smile.

"You're so stubborn, Gil… Not that I didn't know…"

"…I'm sorry."

"It's fine… In that case, you think of the next one, all right…?"

Vincent tilted his head as he made his request, presuming on Gilbert's goodwill like the younger sibling he was. "Huh?" Gilbert said. His eyes went wide.

Vincent told him he'd made several proposals of his own. They'd all been turned down, and now he was out of ideas. At that, Gilbert grew a bit flustered.

"I-I wouldn't know what to—"

"I'm fine, you know… You don't have to do anything at all. You were the one who brought it up, Gil…"

When confronted with that, Gilbert had no way to argue.

That said, forced to think about it suddenly this way, he had no idea what would count as compensation. He hadn't been able to tell what Vincent really wanted from their conversation up to this point. He felt like sighing. Simply being called to the Nightray manor on a pointless errand had been enough to depress him, and now this…

He'd meant to head straight back to Pandora Headquarters. He'd never imagined something like this would come up.

Ahh, this really isn't my lucky day…

Gilbert remembered the newspaper he'd read at breakfast that morning.

That article in the divination corner.

YOUR LUCK IS OFF THE CHARTS TODAY! EVERYTHING YOU MAKE OR DO WILL GO WELL—

The second after he'd skimmed the article, he'd taken a mouthful of black tea he'd accidentally salted instead of sugared, and had choked in a big way.

What *fantastic luck?!* he'd fumed.

You couldn't believe a word of anything printed in the divination corner.

"Go on, Gil. Hurry… Hurry…"

As his brother urged him on, smiling drowsily, he started to feel a bit irritated. It was rather late now, but he was sure. His little brother didn't want him to make amends. He didn't want to be consoled.

He was just having fun making trouble for him.

That certainty changed Gilbert's irritation into exasperation.

If that's how it is… I'll do it!

Gilbert stood; his cheeks were flushed. He ordered Vincent to stand, too. Vincent got up from the sofa; he seemed to be looking forward to finding out what Gilbert would do.

The divination article had risen in Gilbert's mind. The article had held these words, too: ON A DAY LIKE THIS, IT MIGHT BE GOOD TO ATTEMPT SOMETHING YOU DON'T USUALLY DO. Gilbert was more than half desperate. He felt he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

"Have you made up your mind, Gil…?" Vincent was beaming.

"Yeah," Gilbert answered in a low voice.

And then:

Attempt something I don't usually do?! Well, that would be this—!

Gilbert launched himself at Vincent, closing the gap between them. Just before he reached the startled Vincent, he raised his manacled hands high. He brought the ring the chain made of his arms down over Vincent's head, his shoulders, trapping his little brother—

It was a surprise attack. An inescapably strong hug.

It was the first time Gilbert had made the first move in as long as he could remember. His little brother's body was still slender, even in adulthood.

Just as Gilbert tightened the arms he'd passed around Vincent's back…

"……!!"

He heard Vincent gasp sharply. He felt his little brother freeze up in his arms.

In the instant he was hugged, Vincent's expression twisted into something very ugly.

However.

Gilbert, who was hugging his little brother tightly, his face buried in his shoulder, didn't see it.

6

Child of ill omen.

He'd thought the idea that those with red eyes heralded disasters was a pointless, unfounded superstition.

However, for just one person, Vincent thought he really had been a "child of ill omen" who'd brought down disaster.

For his brother Gilbert, who'd protected him, been wounded, and suffered constantly.

"Don't worry. I won't go anywhere."

That was what his brother would say to him, long ago, kindly and firmly, whenever he left him.

Vincent knew. He knew the feelings hidden behind those words, the feelings his brother hadn't been able to hide completely.

"Don't worry."

He knew which of them was really worried.

"I won't go anywhere."

He knew which of them that reminder was directed at.

Those words were a knife.

They were a knife his big brother pointed at himself as he wavered between feelings of being able to breathe freely if he abandoned his little brother, and of being unable to leave the little brother who depended on him.

They had been his brother's naiveté, his kindness, and he'd clung to them.

But, Vincent thought. Even without wielding that knife, his brother probably wouldn't have left him. He probably couldn't have. His big brother wanted someone who depended on him, someone who needed him.

It was his weakness, the flaw in his heart, and, with his young instincts, he'd taken advantage of it.

His brother's desire to be needed was so strong it could have been called a curse.

Yes. Those manacles…

They really did suit his big brother.

* * *

"What're you grinning about? That's seriously creepy."

It was several hours after Gilbert had made his escape from Vincent's room and left the main residence.

Vincent lay sprawled on a sofa. It was his visitor, a woman, who'd spoken. She had an impish air about her, and she'd casually flung aside a robe that could easily have enveloped her from head to toe that she had worn over provocative clothes with a plunging neckline.

She was holding a white cat, stroking its head. She said she'd picked it up on her way to the Nightray manor.

Vincent had the feeling he'd seen the cat somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where.

"Did something nice happen, Vince, my boy?"

"Mm, yes, well…"

Answering languidly, Vincent sat up, turning a vague, dreamy smile on the woman.

Her name was Lottie.

She was one of the Baskervilles, a group that was at total war with Pandora, the organization with which Vincent was affiliated.

Echo was standing in the room, by the wall, but Lottie paid no attention to her. It was as though she felt there was nothing there at all, as far as she was concerned. Either that or she was ignoring her, as if she was no more than a doll that had been placed there.

Vincent continued, cheerfully.

"Someone sent me a tasteless vase today, and I was annoyed, but…"

He'd told Gilbert it was important, but he'd been meaning to throw it out anyway. It was true that the woman who'd sent it to him had feelings for him, but he'd won her over long ago and had her wrapped around his little finger. If he'd broken it, she'd never have complained.

However, even that piece of rubbish had given him a way to play with Gilbert.

It might have been coincidence, or possibly good luck, that he'd happened to be holding a vase he was planning to throw away when he called to Gilbert.

And besides…

"Thanks to that, I remembered…"

There was no logical connection between his sentences, and Lottie looked as though they made absolutely no sense to her. "Huh?"

He didn't mind if she didn't understand.

Vincent had spoken in Lottie's direction, but he was very nearly talking to himself.

"I remembered… No, that isn't quite right. I'd never forgotten…"

The chill that had run through his entire body when Gilbert had hugged him. The nausea, the violent feeling of rejection. He'd pushed at Gilbert's chest involuntarily, trying to shove him away, but Gilbert's arms had been linked by the manacles, and they were a solid circle. They wouldn't let him escape.

…And so he'd called to Echo, sharply. Echo had severed the chain on the manacles with a blade she'd had up her sleeve, freeing Vincent.

He really had thought he'd throw up. All because Gilbert had touched him.

Managing a smile with difficulty, he chased Gilbert from the room, telling him that was enough. Bewildered by his brother's reaction, Gilbert had left.

He could catch his older brother when he was running away from him, but he couldn't accept it when his brother approached him.

Never.

To the point where he felt physical, visceral rejection.

"Today was my lucky day…"

"Oh it was, huh? That's great! Not that I have any idea what you're talking about!"

Lottie sounded disgusted. Vincent just smiled at her.

No, he'd never forgotten.

What filthy, cowardly, unfair, villainous things he thought he could do for Gilbert's sake. How unforgivable he thought it was for Gilbert to touch a body as impossibly soiled and cursed as his.

Today really is a lucky day…

Because he'd been able to reaffirm that with unexpected force.

"All right, Lottie. Shall we begin? There's intrigue to discuss…"

When he spoke to her, Lottie's irritated expression dissolved into a cruel smile.

Vincent smiled back, faintly.

Just wait, Gil… I'll give you a life of happiness…

It was all for that. Only for that.

A world where Gil's child of ill omen doesn't exist. A world where I never existed.

Everything was for that alone.

7

About that time.

Back at Pandora Headquarters, Gilbert was in the drawing room, playing chess with Oz. Oz had suggested it, as a way to kill time until dinner. In contrast to Oz, who was glaring cheerfully and earnestly at the chessboard, Gilbert was rather absentminded.

When I acted the way the fortune said to, Vince let me go… Does that mean it was on target after all?

Then he thought back to how his brother had reacted when he'd

hugged him.

Was Vince embarrassed? Was that why? W-well, it was sudden, after all —

Thinking about it embarrassed him all over again, and his face flushed a bit. Just then, Oz spoke to him reproachfully: “You’re thinking about something else, aren’t you, Gil?” “Sorry,” he answered, hastily yanking his attention back to the chess match in front of him.

They’d only just begun the game, but on the chessboard, Gilbert’s side was disastrously outnumbered.

“If you’re *thaaaaaat* not into this, Gil, I’m not showing you any mercy!”

Oz picked up a knight, raised his hand high, and set the piece down on the board with a loud *clack*.

“—And checkmate! ♪”

Gilbert examined the chessboard. His king was surrounded by Oz’s forces, completely trapped. He’d been pushed hard the entire match and ended up losing dismally. It was a natural result: He wasn’t good to begin with, and he hadn’t been concentrating on the game.

Meekly admitting his loss, Gilbert bowed his head. Sounding a little disgusted, Oz said, “Man, you’re weak, Gil.” Gilbert couldn’t help but smile wryly.

He thought of what had happened in Vincent’s room and silently murmured, “I really am. …You’re right. I am. I’m glad I didn’t do it.”

At his words, Oz—who didn’t know the circumstances—looked at him blankly.

~ Fin ~

...THAT WAS A SUR-PRISE.
TO BE HONEST ...
A SIDE EPISODE OF LUCKY DAY
...ECHO HAD NEVER SEEN VINCENT-SAMA MAKE A FACE LIKE THAT BEFORE, AND...
...ECHO WAS...
MORE THAN THAT...
THAT MOVE HE MADE WAS STARTLING, TOO, BUT...
HEH.
ECHO. DID YOU JUST... LAUGH...?
ECHO DIDN'T LAUGH.
REALLY?
REALLY.
PURU (SHAKE)
PURU
PURUN
SHAKIN
SHAKIN (SNIP)
HOW OLD...

He's fine with approaching others but hates being approached. A contrary person.
Wants to be hated.

The Story
of
Friendship

CRADLE SONG

Words of Prayer

Cradle of light
Cradle of light
Blown by the winds of time
Drift on waves of dappled sunlight
And, before you know it,
Reach the shores of "_____"

Ahh, what shore was it, I wonder…?

1

It was a night so quiet you could have heard the sound of a distant needle being dropped.

Eleven o'clock.

Xerxes Break was sitting on the bed in a guest room at Pandora Headquarters, relaxing.

He'd changed from the black Pandora uniform into his own rough clothes. He had a lollipop in his mouth, and occasionally he'd roll it around as though he'd just remembered it. Possibly because it was late, Emily, the doll that sat on his left shoulder, looked rather sleepy.

Break's face was tipped up to the ceiling, and his expression was vague, as though his mind was wandering, lost in thought.

Finally:

"…Mm, no, I can't remember."

Upon reaching that conclusion, Break got up from the bed.

Maybe it had been summoned by the air of this all too quiet night: For a while now, a nostalgic melody and its lyrics had been circling in his mind. He was missing a piece of the lyrics, though, as if a moth had eaten a hole in them. He couldn't remember that little bit, and he hadn't been able to unearth it from his memories.

Well, never mind, Break thought, giving up easily.

Either way, it wasn't the sort of song he normally thought about. It wasn't likely to cause him any trouble.

He walked over to the wardrobe that stood in a corner of the room.

This was the room Break always used when he spent the night at Pandora Headquarters. He set his hands on the knobs of the wardrobe's doors, opening them. Several suits of clothing hung inside.

As he opened the doors, he heard the sound of something hard rumbling down below, and several glass bottles rolled into view on the wardrobe's floor. Break bent easily and picked them up. They were bottles of aged whiskey.

Still crouched down, Break gazed into the wardrobe. "…They've rather built up, haven't they," he murmured. More than a dozen bottles of all sorts of liquor—whiskey, brandy, bourbon—had been casually stuffed into the wardrobe.

Break hadn't purchased a single one of them himself. Some had been

given to him; others had been gifts to the House of Rainsworth. It wasn't unusual for families with the four great dukedoms' status to receive presents from other nobles, nor was it rare for these presents to be alcohol of some sort.

However, neither the lady who was the head of the House of Rainsworth nor her granddaughter was actively fond of alcohol. The bottles they received were passed from person to person and eventually ended up in Break's hands.

"This may have been perfect timing, actually—"

Just as Break murmured to himself, there was a knock at the door.

A rather hushed, familiar voice spoke:

"Break? Are you still awake?"

The voice belonged to Sharon Rainsworth, granddaughter of Sheryl Rainsworth, the head of the Rainsworth family.

With a muttered "Whoops," Break returned the whiskey bottle he'd been holding to the wardrobe and shut the doors. In a very casual voice, he directed an answer to the corridor—"Yes, yes, my lady, I'm awake…!"—and walked over to the door.

When he opened it, Sharon was standing right on the other side, still in her day dress.

"I'm just on my way to bed. It's long past time."

"You're up very late—have you been working?"

"Yes, there was rather a lot of paperwork I had to finish up… I did finish, though."

Sharon gave a small yawn. She was still quite young, but Sheryl, the head of the family, was getting on in years, and Sharon handled some of her duties for her, so her days were quite busy. This was something Sharon herself did voluntarily, and she never grumbled or complained.

"Break, what about you?"

Break answered Sharon's question without hesitation:

"Mm, yes. I'll be turning in soon myself."

However, possibly because she'd known him for so many years, Sharon seemed to sense something fishy in his answer. Her eyes grew suspicious. "…Somehow I doubt that." Her gaze was stern, but Break took no notice of it.

Sharon put up her index finger, sharply, holding it right in front of Break's nose.

"You mustn't stay up late when there's no particular reason for it. You aren't young anymore, you know."

"I'm much obliged for your concern, my lady."

Catching the index finger that was hovering in front of his nose, Break thanked her nonchalantly. "I wasn't particular concerned," Sharon muttered indistinctly, and drew her hand back. Break released the finger he'd so dutifully captured.

As if confirming the sensation of having been caught, Sharon curled

her other hand around that finger and looked up at Break again. Her eyes held no reproach now. In a voice that was simply gentle, she said:

"Good night, Xerx-niisan. Sweet dreams."

Sweet dreams.

Sharon often added those words to her bedtime greetings.

Fifteen years ago, after being taken in by the Rainsworths, waking or sleeping, Break had been tormented by memories of the crimes he'd committed as the knight Kevin Legnard. The first person to speak those words to him had been Sharon's mother, Shelly.

Somewhere along the way, as if she'd inherited them from her mother, Sharon had begun to say them, too.

In a way, the words were like a prayer.

Even now, when Break no longer had nightmares every night.

She probably did it without being particularly conscious of it.

And so Break thanked her, and he didn't tell her it wasn't necessary. He just smiled, returning the greeting:

"Good night, Sharon."

After he watched Sharon walk down the corridor, returning to her own room, Break closed the door. He put his hands on his hips and gazed at the room. "Sharon does have good instincts," he murmured. It was already very late. However, for adults, the night was just beginning.

"…Now then, I suppose I'll start getting ready," Break muttered.

2

Late at night, so late the date was on the verge of changing.

"'All it takes to make a drink delicious is a beautiful moon and a good friend'—"

Looking up at the night sky from beside the window, Break lifted a silver goblet to his lips. A bright full moon shone in the clear, perfectly cloudless sky.

Break had lost his left eye long ago, and by now most of the sight in his right eye was gone as well. Even with his unreliable vision, he could tell that tonight's moon was a superb drinking companion.

"Who was it who said that, Reim-san?"

Break turned around, raising his goblet as if in a toast. In the center of the room was a small, round table with two chairs, one on either side. One of the chairs held Break's friend, Reim Lunettes. As he tilted one of the same goblets, he gave the name of an old author.

On hearing the name from Reim, Break looked as if it all made sense.

"That's right, that's right. That's just like you, Reim-san. What a good memory you've got. You're so dependable."

"You're the one who told me, Xerx. What good is it if the teacher

forgets?"

Reim spoke like a professor lecturing a poor student. In contrast to Break, who wore his rough, private clothes, he was in his Pandora uniform. Apparently his clerical work had dragged on, and he'd only just finished a short while ago.

Break was the one who'd invited Reim to come drinking tonight. Actually, for the most part, when the two of them drank together, Break was the one who'd suggested it. Reim, who attached too much importance to his daily work, seldom made such suggestions.

The goblets the two of them held were filled with a famous brandy. On the table sat the pastries Reim had brought: apricot pie and chocolate fondant. The brandy had been chosen, "for starters," to complement the sweets.

"And let me tell you one thing."

Reim set his goblet on the table as he spoke.

"The author who left those words was a contrary person, and I hear he died without ever managing to make a friend."

"'Asking the impossible,' was he?"

"I heard that bit from you, too, Break. 'What a pitiful soul…' you said, laughing."

"—My, my." Break's eyes widened slightly in pretended astonishment.

He hadn't been able to remember that lyric earlier, either. He said, self-deprecatingly, that his head seemed to be on its last legs.

"By the way," Reim added, in response.

"His cause of death was a whiskey milk punch."

"Drank too much, did he? Was that mine, too?" Break asked, cocking his head to one side.

"I looked that up myself," Reim answered.

Then Reim rattled off the author's best-known works and similar things, one after another.

Apparently he'd gotten a bit curious and researched the author during breaks in his work. Break was quite impressed by his friend's excessive diligence. That said, he didn't plan to imitate him, and even if he *had* planned to, he never would have been able to actually do it.

As if taking a breather, Reim picked up a dessert fork and carried a slice of the apricot pie to his mouth. As he chewed, his cheeks softened into a smile.

Now there's a contented-looking face.

Chuckling at Reim's expression, Break walked over to the table. He dropped into a chair, picked up a slice of pie with his bare hand, and stuffed it into his mouth. The piecrust shell was crisp, and the moist apricot filling had an elegant sweet-and-sour taste. It certainly was a masterpiece that would soften any expression.

Break gave a sigh. It felt as if the day's fatigue were melting away

into that sweetness.

The room was filled with a sweet scent and the aura of bliss the two of them radiated. For a short while, they enjoyed the harmony spun by the brandy and pastries in near-silence.

It was Break who started the conversation up again.

"And? How has work been lately?"

At this question, delivered in a light tone, Reim gave a small "Hmm…," hesitating with the goblet at his lips.

"Well," he murmured, then answered coldly:

"No hitches."

He tipped the brandy into his mouth and swallowed.

Then he continued:

"Only it feels as if the employees are becoming less accurate in their individual duties. Particularly the younger employees. Of course, I caution and instruct them every time, but unless each employee stays constantly vigilant, there can be no improvement. Today, too, I encountered the same mistake three times in a document, so I ended up doing it for him…even though I knew that wouldn't do the man any good. And then, recently, supplies tend to stay unreplenished a bit too long. It would have been unthinkable for us to run out of cords for binding documents when I was in charge of supplies. There was an issue with the higher-ups' schedule coordination, and the start time for one meeting was delayed as a result. Contact is slipshod; there was an employee who had a business memo for me but forgot to give it to me. When I cautioned him about it, he said it was because he was 'still in his first year at Pandora.' They don't know how to listen properly. There was dust on the office windowsills… Well, that's about the size of it. No problems."

"I see," Break responded. In what sounded like an intentionally bantering tone, he said:

"That last bit sounded like a mother-in-law who's hard on her son's wife, Reim-san."

That earned him a "Don't tease me" and a mild glare from behind Reim's glasses. Calmly, Break said, "Go on, here," and poured brandy into his friend's goblet.

Reim raised his goblet to chest height, glancing at the amber liquid.

"Most of the employees are doing their jobs properly. If they weren't, a special organization like Pandora wouldn't function."

"Yes, if we're able to work smoothly, it's all thanks to your support."

Break's genuine expression of gratitude was met with a reliable, "We're simply doing our duty."

This response was very like his friend, and Break gave an honest smile. Reim glanced back at Break.

"Xerx. What about you?"

"What do you mean, 'what'?"

“All sorts of things. We don’t get many opportunities to talk one-on-one like this.”

Reim was often at Pandora Headquarters, while Break moved around freely on everything from public maneuvers to clandestine ones, and they had very few regular points of contact.

I’m probably making him worry about me, he thought.

Break turned his gaze very slightly to empty space. For a little while, he hunted for words.

“Well…I’m getting by somehow.”

It was a vague answer for a vague question. Reim furrowed his brow slightly.

“Somehow, hmm?”

“Some things go well, and others don’t… But, yes, somehow.”

“I see. That’s true. You’re able to ask me to come drink with you, after all.”

The more troublesome the problem Break had, the less he discussed it with others. Reim knew this side of Break well, and he spoke as if from experience.

Those words also showed that, although Break issued most of the invitations to drink, it wasn’t because Reim wasn’t concerned about his friend most of the time. He was *always* concerned, and his concern took the form of “waiting to be invited.”

Break gave a wry smile; his friend was clever at his job, but quite clumsy when showing consideration.

When he moved to top up Reim’s goblet with brandy, Break noticed how light the bottle felt.

He shook it. There was only a little left. Even though they’d managed to drain a bottle of brandy in less than an hour, both Break and Reim were sober. Neither of them would get drunk on something like that. In fact, Break had never seen Reim get properly drunk, no matter how much he drank.

The heaviest drinker in Pandora, known only to a select few: That was Reim Lunettes.

“Now then, what should we have *next*?” Break peeked under the table. Several bottles he’d taken from the wardrobe were lined up there.

Considering who they’d been presents from, he knew anything he picked would be a good bet. Break stretched a hand out at random and took the first bottle his fingers touched. Break caused his friend worry on a daily basis, but it wasn’t as if he wasn’t grateful to him.

And so:

Tonight, he thought, *I’ll reward Reim-san for all his hard work.*

Thirty minutes later.

“…Xerx, the room is sort of rocking… What is…”

As he spoke, Reim’s face was slightly flushed.

Break laughed: “Huh-huh-huh.” His face was clearly redder than Reim’s. On his left shoulder, Emily cackled cheerfully, too.

“Well, well! What an odd situation this is. Reim-san, that’s known as ‘being drunk.’ Even unlikely things happen on occasion, it seems! You know, I feel sort of light and floaty myself~. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“You’re the one whosh… Nn, it’s you who’s drunk!”

Reim seemed to be having trouble enunciating; he tripped over his tongue in the middle of his comeback, which made Break laugh harder. At the same time, in a corner of his inebriated mind, he was astonished.

They’d only emptied about half of their second bottle. Ordinarily, even Break wouldn’t get seriously drunk on just a bottle and a half, and for Reim, it was absolutely unheard of. Break wondered if it was because he’d chosen the bottle at random. He’d selected it without much thought, and at first, Reim had said, “It tastes different, doesn’t it.” Still, they’d immediately declared, “…But not bad,” and gone right on drinking.

By now, Reim must also have felt that something was off. He stretched out a hand to Break, who was holding the bottle.

“Let me…take a look at that,” he said.

Since Break had been pouring the whole time, Reim hadn’t gotten a good look at the bottle.

“Go ahead.” Break held it out, but his hand slipped and he dropped it on the floor. Fortunately, the lid had been closed, so the contents didn’t spill. Reim looked disgusted. “It’s fine, I’ll get it.” He stood up. But…

“Oops—”

His feet were very slightly unsteady, and he staggered. From Break’s left shoulder, Emily promptly said, “Whoo, ‘weaving Reim’! I got me a super-rare one!”

“Don’t say ‘rare’! Honestly, you’re a bit too drunk, Xerx. You might pay for it tomorrow—”

Picking up the bottle as he spoke, Reim sat back down in his chair.

Then he looked at the label and fell silent. Break’s head flopped to one side in an exaggerated manner as he silently wondered what had happened. In a low voice, Reim murmured:

“Can’t read it.”

“My. If you’ve lost the ability to read, you’re too drunk.”

“No! I mean it’s written in letters I’ve never seen before.”

Break had no idea what he was talking about. Lowering his voice even further, Reim continued:

“……Never mind that. Hey, Xerx.” His voice was shaking.

“Yes?” Break blinked.

Although it might have been his imagination, from Reim’s expression, he seemed to have sobered up all at once. His flushed face now looked pale. Reim wasn’t looking at the bottle’s label. He was holding the bottle up to the candles, letting the light shine through its contents.

“This liquor…has a pickled ‘lizard-like thing’ inside.”

“…Huh,” Break said in a parched voice.

“I’ve heard of that. Apparently *lots* of medicinal alcohol is like that. They’ll preserve snakes or lizards in it—”

“Listen to what I’m actually saying. I said ‘lizard-*like thing*.’ …It has horns.”

“A horned lizard…perhaps?”

“It has wings on its back. Bat wings.”

“……”

“And two tails.”

“……” Break felt himself sober up dramatically.

“And I can’t see that clearly through the glass, but…it’s got three eyes.”

In other words, it was…

“Mystery alcohol” with a mysterious lizard-like creature preserved in it!

It was if a cold wind had whistled through the room.

The window was shut properly, of course.

Reim’s entire body trembled, and he suddenly yelled, “Xerx, you—!” He closed in on Break.

“What have you been giving me to drink, you idiotic Xerx?! At least check to see what it is before you drink it! Don’t pour me dodgy liquids! What if that was poisonous?! I haven’t been moving very well for a while now; is that *actually* because I’m drunk?! What if I’m paralyzed, not drunk?! You drank it, too! What are we going to do if we both collapse—?!”

“Now, now, Reim-san. Calm down, please,” Break attempted to soothe Reim.

Break was also unsettled, but—maybe because his friend had overreacted before he could—he managed to remain calm. Considering that this had been a present given to the House of Rainsworth, he was sure it couldn’t be anything as dangerous as poison. However, possibly because his thoughts hadn’t taken him that far, Reim’s panic continued unabated:

“A-as if I could calm dow—”

"No, I mean, if you kick up a row like that…"

"Urp…" Reim was white as a sheet.

"…You'll get queasy and throw up!"

The friendly warning came too late. Reim clapped a hand to his mouth and ran from Break's room.

Is he going to be all right? Cocking his head, Break picked up the mystery alcohol Reim had flung away.

He thought it was probably some sort of medicinal liquor that had been given to Sheryl.

The alcohol hadn't seemed that strong, so what had intoxicated—or paralyzed—even Reim had probably been some sort of essence extracted from the mysterious lizard-like creature that had been preserved in it, rather than the alcohol itself. He had heard that medicinal alcohol agreed with some and disagreed quite remarkably with others…

"I thought I was going to die…"

Reim, who'd returned, white-faced, shot a dirty look at Break. Reim had never gotten sick from drinking, and it seemed to have been a pretty harsh experience.

"My head is pounding. …You're all right, Xerx?"

"Nn—." At the question, Break looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm still drunk, but it's calmed down quite a bit. This mystery liquor might not have suited you, Reim-san. It's probably wholesome as a general rule, but I wouldn't drink any more of it if I were you."

"…Not for love or money," Reim responded. He sounded disgusted.

When Break suggested that he lie down on the bed for a while, Reim hesitated for a bit, then said that he would. He crossed to Break's bed and fell down onto it, back first. Already beginning to drift off, he spoke very quietly:

"—right, Xerx?"

"?? Come again, Reim-san?"

"Listen… If anything's…wrong, talk to me."

Break's eyes widened, very slightly.

"I'll help…for sure—"

Having said that much, Reim's breathing went soft and light. He was asleep.

Break almost never saw his friend sleep, and for a little while, he gazed at his face. Finally, he murmured something in a voice so small no one could have heard it. Then he took a new bottle of red wine from under the table and picked up the corkscrew.

"All right, I think I'll drink a bit more, with the moon and my friend's sleeping face as complements."

Break's voice was cheerful.

…How long had he slept?

Suddenly finding it hard to breathe, Reim opened his eyes. *What is it?* he thought. Something was covering his face. It wasn't that heavy. It was warm, as if it was alive. It had short, smooth hair, and the thing that was covering Reim's face said:

"Mew."

"—?!" Reim sat up sharply.

The sudden movement sent a dull pain through his head, but the full-body drunkenness…or rather, his paralysis, had cleared up. The thing that had been on his face, a cat with white fur, hopped down to the floor, looked up at Reim, and mewed again. Break called to him carelessly, a wine glass in one hand.

"Sorry! I did tell him 'no,' but…"

"Wh-why is there a cat in this room?"

"He's been here the whole time, since before you got here. Under the bed," Break said, nonchalantly.

"Huh?" Reim was startled. Break continued:

"The door isn't hung very well; sometimes it comes open a little on its own. …He slipped in through the crack in the door at some point while I was getting ready for you. He got under the bed and wouldn't come out, and he was behaving himself, so I left him alone, but—"

As he listened to Break's explanation, Reim looked at the white cat. Then he realized that the ribbon tied around its neck was familiar.

"But that's Ada-sama's Snowdrop! What is he doing here…?"

"…Ada-sama's…cat?"

In response to Break's mystified question, Reim nodded. This time it was his turn to explain.

"I saw him once when I paid a visit to the Vessalius mansion. Ada-sama has two cats, Snowdrop and Kitty, and she seemed extremely fond of them. The cats were also quite attached to Ada-sama…"

"Hmm. In that case, she may be worried by now—"

Agreeing with Break, Reim turned his gaze back to the white cat.

The cat was just slipping through the slightly open door, disappearing into the corridor.

Uh-oh! Reim thought.

If he obediently returned to its mistress, fine, but if he didn't— Reim hastily got up from the bed, glancing at Break.

"Xerx, I'm off. I have to catch that cat and return it to Ada-sama."

"At this hour?"

"She may be too worried to sleep, you know."

Reim crossed briskly to the door, not even taking the time to straighten his rumpled uniform.

When he opened the door and looked out, the white cat was sauntering down the edge of the hall, as if it were out for a stroll. Reim was relieved; it looked as if he'd be able to catch it quickly. He ducked back into the room once, excused himself to Break—"I'm sorry for all

the commotion,"—then started to go out into the corridor.

At that point, as if in farewell, Break spoke.

"Ahh, then, Reim-san. One last thing."

"What, Xerx?" Reim stopped, thinking he must have something he wanted to say.

"—Do you know this song?"

Song? Reim looked puzzled.

Reim left. Break was alone in the room.

"I see. No wonder I couldn't remember it. My head's really no good…"

He gave a wry, self-deprecating smile.

3

"…Well. Reim-san's forgotten his notebook."

As he was tidying up the room, Break noticed Reim's well-used notebook, left behind on the bed. No doubt it had slipped out of his breast pocket while he was lying down.

Reim's notebook was practically a part of Reim's body, and the employees of Pandora considered it a symbol of his competence at work. Apparently some of the staff even believed that the hidden mysteries of clerical work were recorded in Reim's notebook.

Although it was silly to deify it, Break thought Reim would probably be in a fix if he didn't have his notebook.

Just as he was thinking he'd return it to him the next day, there was a knock at the door.

For a moment, he thought Reim had returned, but the knock didn't have his conscientious regularity about it. It was a rough, loud knock. After the knock, he heard a rather deep voice through the door: "Heeeey, Xerxes."

"Oscar-sama?" Break muttered.

He crossed to the door and opened it. Standing behind it was a big man in his prime with splendid whiskers: the head of the House of Vessalius, Oscar Vessalius.

Oscar raised a hand, greeting him with a frank "Hey." Then he gave a long, long sigh tinged with fatigue. "Haaaaaaaaah…" It was so late at night that the date had changed. According to Oscar, his meetings and interviews had gone on and on, and they'd just now let him go.

"…Well, well. You've been working very hard indeed."

"Ah, never mind that, the work's over and done with. More importantly… Xerxes."

Oscar called Break's name in a stern voice. He fixed him with a sharp,

level stare.

Although, as the head of the House of Vessalius, Oscar was in a position of power, his consideration for his subordinates and his friendly personality made him the idol of many. However, as you'd expect from one at the top, his glowers carried enough force to make any ordinary Pandora employee flee in tears.

That said, Oscar's severe, imposing look didn't seem to faze Break.

As if repaying him in kind, he stared right back with cold, sharp eyes.

When the head of the House of Vessalius came calling this late at night, it could only mean—

"—Oscar-sama."

"…Xerxes."

The air between the two of them sang with tension. It was as if they stood on a completely unpredictable battlefield.

In the midst of an atmosphere in which the first person to move seemed liable to get killed, Break…broke into a fearless smile.

"Want to go?"

He mimed tipping a glass to his lips.

At that, Oscar gave a cry of joy—"Oho!"—and grinned hugely.

He pulled Break into a hug and thumped him on the back.

"*Do* I! Do I ever! I tell ya, things've been so busy lately that I haven't gotten a drink. I can't take it!"

"I was drinking with Reim-san up until a little while ago," Break told him, with no hesitation.

"*Whaaat?!*" Oscar cried.

He turned a reproachful glare on Break. "Call me when you do this stuff. That's not very friendly of you two." Oscar sulked. When all was said and done, he wasn't dignified or anything like it. Just a middle-aged guy who liked his liquor.

Break gave a small, wry smile.

"Reim-san wouldn't be able to relax and drink if the head of one of the four great dukedoms were in our midst, you see."

Oscar met that explanation with a dissatisfied "Tch!"

"There, there." Break soothed him, inviting him into the room. Fortunately, there was still plenty of liquor left. Break had already returned the bottles to the wardrobe, and as he took several out again, Oscar put his hands together in front of his chest and danced a little jig.

If he was this happy, Break thought it was probably true that he hadn't had a drink in a while.

"I bet I'll be able to shoot the works tonight, Xerxes!"

"You mean 'tonight, *too*.' Drinking with you is always an ordeal, isn't it."

Although it didn't happen often, Break had drunk alone with Oscar a few times.

Drinking with Oscar was completely different from drinking with

Reim. Summed up in a few words, the difference lay entirely in the phrase Oscar had used: “shoot the works.” There were still about ten bottles of liquor left, but Break wasn’t sure it would be enough.

…AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER.

As expected, it hadn’t been enough. Several emptied liquor bottles lay on the floor. Oscar seemed to have gotten hot; he’d stripped to the waist and pressed Break to do the same.

“I refuse. I won’t strip.”

“What’s this? Do I hear a lack of confidence? Your gut isn’t pooching out, is it?”

Oscar gave a snorting laugh, as if he’d just visualized his own words.

Break sighed.

“What are you talking about? I don’t have any extra flesh on me.”

“Ohhh, I dunno about *that*. Heh. In contrast, take a look at *my* stunning physique!”

Oscar struck a macho pose, flexing the muscles in his upper body. It was overwhelmingly oppressive.

Break looked deflated.

In the midst of this festive atmosphere, Oscar resettled himself heavily in his chair. He picked up a nearly empty bottle of red wine and poured himself a glass. He knocked back a swallow, then took a breath.

“…Say, Xerxes.”

“What is it, Oscar-sama? You’re going too fast, slow down a bit—”

“Look after Oz and Gil, all right? Please.”

“—Oscar-sama,” Break murmured. Oscar’s face was red all the way down his neck, but his eyes held, not only drunkenness, but intense concern for the two he’d just named.

“I’m looking out for them as much as I can, too, but…it doesn’t feel safe to send either of ’em out on their lonesomes yet—”

With an almost empty glass in his hand, Break answered quietly, “Yes, you’re right.”

As he spoke, Oscar’s expression was pained.

“Care about them, watch them… That’s about all I can do, though. It’s pitiful.”

“I think that’s fine. It’s enough.”

Break wasn’t saying it just to console him. He knew Oscar thought of Oz and Gilbert as his own sons, even though they weren’t linked by blood. He also knew the two of them looked up to Oscar like a father.

How reassuring must Oscar’s very existence seem to them?

Break drained his glass with a theatrical gesture, then continued: “… And so.”

“I’d say all you have to do now is give them advice once in a while, as someone who’s seen more of life.”

“……You think?” Oscar looked dubious. His expression could have

belonged to a worrywart father who doted on his children.

"Heh-heh." Break gave a small laugh.

"Yes, adults say it with their backs. Just stand tall and tough!"

He raised his glass, lightly.

"I see," Oscar muttered, smiling a bit wryly. The two of them clinked their glasses together gently.

Tink. The clear, small sound echoed through the room.

…THIRTY MINUTES AFTER THAT.

"Oscar-sama. Look, the liquor's all gone. It's about time you went home."

As Break spoke, he cast a mildly appalled look at the empty bottles scattered across the floor. From his left shoulder, Emily jeered, too: "Yeah, listen to the man!" Compared to Oscar, Break had sipped his drinks, but even so, he'd had quite a lot. He was close to his limit.

However, Oscar, who'd drunk twice as much as Break, said, "I know there's more. Get it out here, c'mon," and wouldn't budge.

"I'm telling you there really isn't, Oscar-sama. Just so you know, I won't be escorting you home."

Break's warning didn't seem to reach Oscar's ears. He stalked over to the wardrobe, opened the doors, and began rummaging around inside. Finding the mystery liquor—which Break and Reim had drunk about half of before putting it away—he pulled it out happily.

"Hey, there *was* some. All right, let's have a toast."

"None for me, thank you. I wouldn't drink that if I were you, Oscar-sama."

As Break checked him, Oscar took a good look at the bottle of liquor, perplexed. Then he said, "Ho-*hoh.*

"You've got some pretty rare stuff here."

Apparently Oscar knew what it was.

According to Oscar's explanation, he'd bought some from a foreign merchant a while back, just once. The thing inside was a lizard found only on a distant southern island, and, according to the sales pitch, the liquor in which it was preserved had restorative properties and promoted perennial youth and long life.

Oscar said he hadn't felt much effect from it, so he'd only bought it that one time.

Break wasn't sure whether to be impressed or appalled.

Oscar also explained that the liquor was meant for the elderly, and it wasn't supposed to be given to young people. On rare occasions, it didn't agree with their constitutions, and then it caused vomiting and the paralysis of bodily functions. *I knew it,* Break thought, recalling how Reim had reacted.

In the end, Oscar emptied that bottle on his own and went home, looking satisfied.

After Break had seen him off in the corridor, he wondered whether he'd be all right to work tomorrow. Still, when he remembered his previous experiences of drinking with Oscar, he thought that, after a good night's sleep, he'd be back at work as if nothing had happened, no matter how much he'd had to drink.

"I suppose you might even call that sort a 'model drinker'… Well, I'll take care not to emulate him."

As he spoke, Break was conscious of a faint headache deep inside his skull.

"All right. Even I had a bit too much to drink. Let's have some water, then—"

As he turned around…

"……Break."

Even though she should have been asleep long ago, Sharon was standing just behind him.

She wore a cardigan over her nightdress, and a dark, ominous aura over that. There was a tic at her temples, and as Sharon looked up at Break's face, her eyes were steady and cold.

"Well, if it isn't my lady. There's a *beautiful* moon tonight, isn't there."

At Break's cheerful greeting, Sharon said:

"……"

Silently, she pointed into Break's room: *Get inside.*

4

As soon as she'd followed Break into the room, Sharon grimaced. "…I smell liquor."

Then she looked around the room, counting the bottles scattered over the floor.

"There are ten of them… What is the meaning of this, Break?"

"Oscar-sama is truly unmanageable. He just barged in and helped himself to—"

"Be quiet. There's quite enough liquor on your breath, too."

Break had half been telling the truth, but when Sharon checked him sharply, all he could do was hold his tongue.

Ordered to "Sit down for a moment," Break lowered himself into a chair.

Sharon took the other chair, across the table from him. She seemed amazed and disgusted more than angry, although she was probably that as well. Looking around the room once more, Sharon gave a long sigh. "Haaaaaaaaaah…

"—Break."

"Yes?"

"I won't tell you not to drink. I won't say that, but…"

"Ah, I'm sorry, my lady."

When Break raised his hand, interrupting her lecture, Sharon asked, "What is it?" Even as she spoke, she was glaring. "I'm thirsty, so I'm going to get some water," Break informed her, getting up from his chair.

Watching the discontented Sharon out of the corner of his eye, he walked to the bedside shelf and poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher that sat on top of it. Returning to his chair, he drained it without coming up for air. Inwardly, he marveled at how plain water seemed like such nectar after one had been drinking.

"…Listen to me, Break."

After waiting for him to finish his water, Sharon once again turned her sharp gaze on him. Break, who was feeling more like himself now, thought it would be prudent to listen like a good boy, and obediently looked small.

"I'm well aware that adults enjoy their alcohol. However."

Sharon raised a brisk index finger and began the sermon.

"Although there is no problem with consumption in moderation, if you drink enough that the effects linger into the next day, it causes various issues. In any case, I hear that heavy drinking isn't good for you… If you ruin your health with alcohol, believe me, no one will have any sympathy for you. And besides—"

Break had intended to at least look as if he was listening seriously, but the sense of intoxication that enveloped him was beckoning him to the depths of slumber, and his concentration kept breaking up.

Every time his mind strayed, the sharp-eyed Sharon would scold him:

"Break!"

And every time, he'd defend himself:

"I'm listening, I'm *listening*."

After awhile, possibly because Sharon realized it was pointless to lecture a drunk, she murmured, "You're a terribly hopeless adult…" and fell silent. He knew Sharon wasn't just angry with him. She was worried about him.

Break himself was grateful to her for caring enough to get mad at him.

"However, it would be very odd for me to say that…"

As he murmured the words silently to himself, Break chuckled faintly. At that, Sharon said:

"What are you laughing at, Break?! You do realize you're being scolded, don't you?!"

"I *do*, I *know*. I'm sorry."

I'm just like a child being lectured by his mother, he thought.

The thought almost made him laugh again, but he managed to choke it back somehow. When he cast around for something else to think about, something suddenly struck him as odd. Sharon had been

lecturing for quite some time, and she was just catching her breath. “By the way…” Break began.

“I thought you’d retired quite some time ago, my lady.”

It was already nearly three in the morning. Sharon had stopped by to tell him good night at about eleven that night, and she’d been yawning then. Sharon seemed at a loss as to how to answer Break’s question. She looked down, very slightly.

“Once I…got into bed, I found I couldn’t sleep.”

“Is something troubling you?”

Sharon shook her head, telling him that wasn’t it.

“I was thinking, but it wasn’t about anything important. This happens sometimes.”

…This sort of oddly sleepless night.

“Mm.” Break nodded.

True, at present, Sharon was frequently in the public eye as the next head of the House of Rainsworth, and it was likely that she sometimes fell captive to various concerns and was unable to sleep. Her earnest character made this seem all the more probable.

At such times, the thought that not resting would interfere with her work the next day would make it even harder to sleep.

“…I might be able to sleep if I drank a little myself—” Sharon murmured.

Hearing her, Break thought:

That would be a bit of a problem.

He didn’t say it, though. Instead, he said something else:

“Shall I sing you a lullaby?”

A lullaby? Sharon’s lips moved, very slightly. Break nodded.

“It’s a melody Shelly-sama used to sing to you, long ago. I just happened to remember it today.”

On hearing *Shelly*, her mother’s name, Sharon looked taken aback. She might have remembered those nights when she was small and had drifted off to sleep to the sound of her mother’s lullaby. Sharon lowered her eyes to her knees and murmured something, too softly for Break to hear.

He was sure it had been her mother’s name. Presently, Sharon shook her head slowly.

“I’m fine.”

Her voice was quiet. She didn’t sound angry or displeased.

Break gazed at Sharon. Sharon continued:

“A lullaby—I’m no longer such a child that I can’t sleep without relying on something like that.”

“I see. Shall we test it, then?” Break asked.

“Wha—?” Sharon was startled. If it didn’t make her the least bit sleepy, that would be that. If she did get sleepy, she could just go back to her room at that point, he told her, and he began to sing right away.

It was a slow, soft melody that flowed through a distant, nostalgic scene. A gentle song Shelly would hum to the young Sharon when she tucked her into bed. Lyrics that he'd managed to remember completely, thanks to Reim.

"Wha… Break!?"

Sharon started to rise, calling his name, but Break paid no attention. He kept singing.

Although she'd spoken, Sharon didn't actually try to stop him. …She didn't seem able to. She resettled herself in her chair, holding still, looking vaguely bewildered. She might have been embarrassed. She couldn't look straight at Break as he sang, and her gaze wandered restlessly through space.

That said, after all, Break's recollection was dim, and the song came out a bit unsteadily.

He also thought that lullabies were effective only when mothers sang them.

But, well—

Even if he couldn't hope for an immediate effect.

It should at least serve to divert her…

Cradle of light
Cradle of light
Blown by the winds of time
Drift on waves of dappled sunlight
And, before you know it,
Reach the shores of "a happy tomorrow"

…"A happy tomorrow."

I see, he'd thought, when Reim had told him the lyric. *No wonder I couldn't remember it.* The words were practically foreign to him. How much time had passed since he'd stopped wishing for something like that? Since he'd begun to think he wasn't qualified to wish for such a thing?

In an attempt to protect the people of the house he'd served as the knight Kevin Legnard, he'd tried to twist their deaths into another destiny. As a result, he'd lost everyone who was important to him.

They'd been lost because of what he'd done.

He'd thought it could never be all right for someone like him to wish for "tomorrow."

But if it wasn't for him… If it was for someone else…

If his wish were simply that she would be visited by a happy tomorrow…

He thought that might be permitted.

"…My."

After he'd repeated the short lyrics and the leisurely melody a few times, Sharon was breathing peacefully, sound asleep, still seated in her chair. Break was startled that it had worked. Sharon must have been sleepy to begin with, but still.

That said, the plan had been for her to return to her room if she began to feel sleepy.

Her face looked so young as she slept that he was reminded of when he'd met her. He thought it might be nice to gaze at that face for a while, but then thought better of it.

For a short while, Break thought, but there was only one answer.

"…I suppose there's no help for it," he murmured.

He got up from his chair and went around to stand beside the sleeping Sharon. Then, with practiced hands, he lifted Sharon's petite body, cradling her sideways in the position commonly known as a princess carry. Holding Sharon, he walked to the door, opened it dexterously, and went out into the deserted corridor.

As he made his way to Sharon's room, he came across the white cat Reim had been chasing. Apparently it had managed to lose Reim and come back. "Mew," the cat said, looking up at him, and Break cautioned it: "Shh."

Then, in a hushed, mischievous voice, he said, "Listen.

"You *mustn't* disturb my lady's slumber."

He walked along the silent corridor, climbed the stairs, and entered Sharon's room.

He laid Sharon down on the bed and gently pulled the down comforter over her.

Sharon showed no signs of waking. This was only natural: The sun would be up in another two hours. Sharon sometimes stayed up late, either working or reading romance novels, but she was seldom up at this hour.

Walking silently so as not to wake her, Break began to move away from the bedside.

"……No."

The voice was so very small it might have been a sigh. At the same time, Break felt a slight pull on his coat. When he looked, he saw that Sharon had put her hand out from under the comforter and caught his coattail. For a moment, thinking she might have awakened, he almost spoke to her, but Sharon's eyelids were closed.

She'd spoken in her sleep. Break admonished her in a hushed voice:

"…My lady, I'm tired, too. Let go, please, *there's* a good girl."

Gently, he tried to pry Sharon's fingers away, but she had a surprisingly firm grip on his coattail, and she wouldn't let go. Break scratched his cheek in perplexity, thought with his still-intoxicated

brain, then leaned close to Sharon's sleeping face. Putting his lips next to her ear, he whispered:

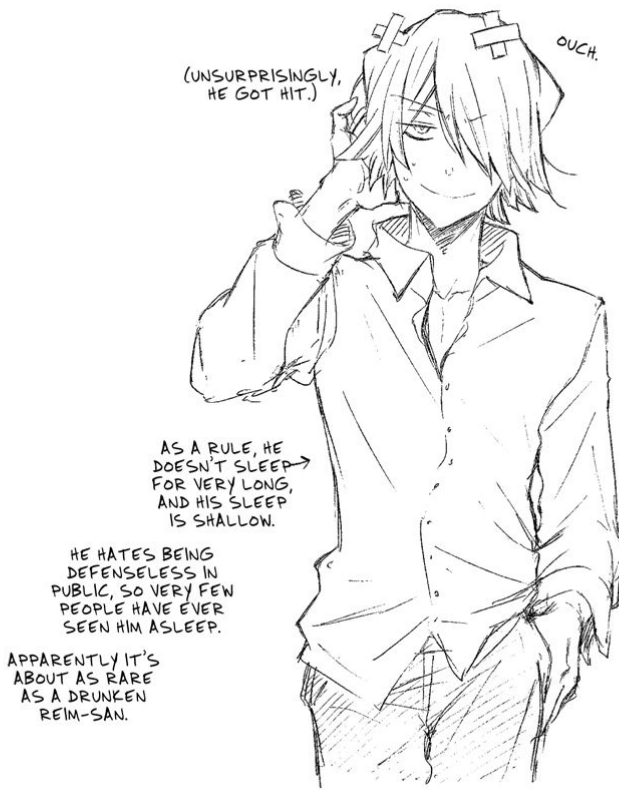
"…You mustn't do that, Sharon. Ladies shouldn't detain gentlemen in their bedrooms—"

"

A SIDE EPISODE OF CRADLE SONG

DOKKUN (BADMP)
WHY!? WHY IS XERX-NIISAN IN MY ROOM!? ON MY BED!? I COULDN'T GET TO SLEEP LAST NIGHT, SO I WENT TO HIS ROOM, AND THEN...
AND THEN ...!?
NN ...
SARA (SFT)
DOKKUN
BAKKUN (BADMP)
BAKU
BAKU
HAH (GASP)
SU (SLINK)
HIS EYELASHES ARE SURPRISINGLY LONG, AREN'T THEY...?
I HAVEN'T SEEN XERX-NIISAN ASLEEP IN AGES...
GORON (ROLL)
WHA...? WHAT AM I DOING!?
GORON
I MUSTN'T ATTACK HIM IN HIS SLEEP LIKE THAT!
CHUN CHUN (CHIRP)

THAT'S RIGHT! XERX-NIISAN MIGHT HAVE DONE THAT MUCH WHILE I WAS SLEEPING. TOUCHED MY HAIR, PERHAPS... WAIT—
DID HE TOUCH ME!?
BOFUN (BLUSH)
NO...BUT IF I DO THAT, HE'LL WAKE AT ONCE AND...
AND SAY "EEEEEK! PERVERT!" AND TEASE ME, I JUST KNOW IT!
HOW MORTIFYING!!
NO, MAYBE I'M OVER-THINKING IT.
I WAS JUST GOING TO TOUCH HIS EYELASHES! ONLY TOUCH!
GORON
...OH DEAR...
AAAAAAAAAAH
AAAAAA
IF HE OPENS HIS EYES NOW, HE'LL TAKE A HARISEN ATTACK, SO HE CAN'T.
I'VE COMPLETELY MISSED THE RIGHT MOMENT TO WAKE UP...
URP...
LATER...
THE LIQUOR THAT HAD GIVEN EVEN REIM-SAN A HANGOVER BECAME THE TALK OF PANDORA.


OUCH.
(UNSURPRISINGLY, HE GOT HIT.)
AS A RULE, HE DOESN'T SLEEP FOR VERY LONG, AND HIS SLEEP IS SHALLOW.
HE HATES BEING DEFENSELESS IN PUBLIC, SO VERY FEW PEOPLE HAVE EVER SEEN HIM ASLEEP.
APPARENTLY IT'S ABOUT AS RARE AS A DRUNKEN REIM-SAN.

The Story

of

a Master and His Servant

UNBALANCED FLOWER

A Tiny Sky

Firework [ˈfī(ə)rˌwərk] An object made by packing a mixture of gunpowder and powdered metals into a tube or similar item, which is then ignited and entertains with sound, light, and color during combustion. Many kinds exist, from large-scale rockets to handheld fireworks for individual use. They are intended to be enjoyed outside, and are not suited to bad weather.

Umbrella [

“Let’s do fireworks!” Oz said.

Pandora Headquarters, Oz’s room, three o’clock in the afternoon.

He was hugging a bag full of handheld fireworks to his chest. Someone had given them to him as a souvenir from a foreign country, he’d said.

“……Fireworks?”

Gilbert, who was standing by the window, looked outside.

The windowpane was wet with fine raindrops, and the faint noise of the rain reached his ears.

It was a rainy day.

The landscape he saw through the window was subdued, its colors dark and shadowed. With a small sigh, Gilbert turned back to Oz. He looked sorry.

“We can’t do fireworks if it’s raining, you know.”

“No worries, Gil. We’d be waiting until night anyway. It’ll stop by then,” Oz declared, bursting with confidence.

Gilbert was sure that confidence was groundless. Although his master had an internal maturity that didn’t match his boyish appearance, Gilbert thought the unusual souvenir—handheld fireworks!—must have sent him into a childish excitement.

Once again, Gilbert turned to the window, looking up through it at the sky.

The leaden sky was covered in heavy, black rainclouds that seemed to go on forever.

The mere sight of a sky like that was depressing. Gilbert almost sighed again, but managed to catch himself. Between Pandora and the Nightray family, he was unusually tired, but he didn’t want to let it show in front of his master. In a small voice, he muttered:

“Is this really…going to stop?”

“This ‘fireworks set’ is amazing! It has kinds I’ve never even seen before in it. Like these, see, the ones that look like thin threads… Wait, are these really fireworks? Maybe they’re parts for some other firework. Well, we’ll just light them and see what happens.”

Oz didn’t even seem to have heard Gilbert’s mutter. He was happily rummaging through the bag of fireworks.

Gilbert glanced at Oz, smiling a bit wryly at his delighted master.

I hope it does clear up, since Oz is so enthusiastic about this… I hope it does, but…

Once again, he looked out the window at the endless cloudy sky.

But I bet it doesn't, he thought.

* * *

Ten at night. Outside, it was raining.

"The rain isn't letting up…"

Gilbert sat down on the sofa, glanced at the window, and murmured.

As he'd predicted, even after night fell, the rain had continued. It wasn't raining all that hard, but it fell obstinately. It didn't seem likely to let up.

It might not even stop until tomorrow morning, he thought.

Oz was on the bed, hugging his bag of fireworks and moaning discontentedly: "Uuuuuhh." Alice lay beside him, breathing deeply and heartily as she slept.

That evening, Oz had invited Alice to come light fireworks, too. She'd been eager at that point, but when the rain didn't stop and the fireworks didn't begin, she'd said, "I'm through waiting!" and gone to sleep, without even going back to her own bed.

Gilbert glanced at Oz, smiled wryly, and spoke to him, trying to soothe him.

"Hey, Oz."

"……What." Oz's answer sounded a bit sulky.

"Why don't we save the fireworks for tomorrow? It's already late."

"I want to do them today."

"Why? …The fireworks won't go anywhere, you know."

"Because I'm in a fireworks mood *today*!"

What kind of mood is that? Gilbert thought. Oz had flung his legs out, and he kicked them petulantly.

"—I caught the I-want-fireworks disease, so there's no helping it, is there, stupid Gil?!"

What kind of disease is that? thought Gilbert.

* * *

At 11:50, it was still raining.

"It's practically tomorrow, Oz. Let's do them tomorrow."

Gilbert reasoned with Oz, handing him some herb tea he'd just made. Oz took the teacup with both hands and said, "Thank you," but he didn't respond to what Gilbert had said. Gilbert couldn't understand why he was so set on lighting fireworks.

Somehow, it didn't look as though he was simply so happy about the fireworks he'd received that he wanted to light them right away.

If Oz wanted something, Gilbert wanted to make it happen for him.

"…If you want to light them no matter what, should we ask to borrow a room somewhere?"

"??? A room? Where?"

Oz looked mystified. Gilbert knit his brow, thinking.

"Let's see. It would have to be a place where it's okay to use fire, so… Maybe the kitchen?"

"……Do you think it would be fun to light fireworks in the kitchen?"

Oz had asked the question with a straight face, and the only answer Gilbert could give him was, "……No."

Oz lifted the teacup to his lips, glanced at the window, and sighed.

The sight of his wistful profile tugged at Gilbert's heart, and he cast about for a plan. Lighting fireworks in the kitchen certainly wouldn't have felt "real"; the idea had been a dull one. "Right," he murmured, searching for something better.

Fireworks were an outdoor pastime, and it was raining outside. The easiest thing would be to postpone them until the next day, but…

"Otherwise, I guess we could light them under an umbrella or something—"

Gilbert had spoken without really thinking, and even as he thought, *Nah, that's not it*, Oz's eyes went wide. He cried out in a voice that no longer held the faintest trace of a sigh:

"That's it! Gil, that's it! We can just use an umbrella!"

"Nuh, no-no-no, Oz, wait, that wasn't—I was just thinking out loud…"

"Aaaw, *man*! It was so simple! Why didn't I think of that?!"

Oz was getting excited all on his own, and when Gilbert tried to put a damper on that excitement, he wouldn't listen.

Oz gulped his herb tea in one go, even though it must still have been hot, and leapt down off the bed. The room around her had grown noisy, but Alice slept on, undisturbed. From the way her mouth moved as if she were chewing something, she might have been dreaming about eating.

Grabbing the bag of handheld fireworks he'd left on the bed, Oz looked at Gilbert.

"Gil, you've got an umbrella, right? That blue one."

"Uh, yeah, it's…in my room, but— Look, that's not what I—"

"All right, go get it and come meet me!" Oz said exuberantly. As if he still couldn't quite believe it, Gilbert asked:

"…Are you serious, Oz?"

The answer to his question came, not in words, but in the form of a brilliant smile.

Oz was serious.

* * *

The sound of fine rain striking the cloth of the opened umbrella.

I wonder which is weirder, lighting fireworks in the kitchen on a rainy day or lighting them under an umbrella?

Gilbert thought, but no answer presented itself.

Both seemed pretty weird to him.

In the courtyard of Pandora Headquarters, on the rain-wet lawn. It was late at night, on top of everything else, and the courtyard was completely deserted. A few lamps were still lit in the rooms of the building where most of the staff members worked, and hazy light spilled out into the courtyard.

Gilbert thought that if any of the employees who were working late happened to glance into the courtyard, they'd wonder what in the world they were doing out here.

As he stood there, holding the umbrella, even Gilbert wondered what they were doing out here.

"And anyway, what's fun about standing out in the rain lighting fireworks under an umbrella?" he muttered to himself, silently. …But.

At Gilbert's feet, there was the sound of a flame catching, and a faint light began to glow.

"Hey, it lit, it lit! Look, Gil, it's pretty!"

Drawn by the voice, he looked down. Under the open umbrella, crouched beside Gilbert, Oz called to him cheerfully, a lit firework in his hand.

The firework Oz held was a simple one, just a thin tube packed with a mixture of gunpowder and colorant. Once lit with a match, thanks to the metal powder's flame reaction, it spouted colorful fire that seemed to slice through the darkness.

"Whew! It's raining, after all; I wasn't sure what I'd do if it didn't catch."

"Well, it did. That's great…"

Oz was honestly enjoying himself, and Gilbert's response was rather evasive.

He couldn't seem to get over feeling odd about the fact that they were standing in the rain, setting off fireworks under an umbrella.

Even if he was glad that Oz was genuinely having fun.

"Oz, why did you want to do fireworks that badly? …Even though it's raining…" Gilbert asked.

Just hearing "fireworks mood" and "I-want-fireworks disease" hadn't told him anything. It made him suspect that Oz was worried about something and trying to vent his frustrations.

"……" For a little while, Oz was silent.

When Gilbert also kept quiet, waiting for a response, Oz spoke, still gazing at the firework.

"—I told you, I just wanted to, that's all. There's no reason.

"Is it that weird?" he added.

Gilbert thought that, if he had to choose between "weird" and "not weird," it would have to be "weird." As he was wondering how he should respond, Oz murmured, "Oh, the firework's over."

One handheld firework didn't last very long. When the flame died away, Oz threw the burned-out remnant of the thin tube into a tin bucket he'd set out in the rain. He took new fireworks from the bag at his feet.

"Okay, this time I'll light two at once!"

As Oz grew more animated, all by himself, he looked up at Gilbert and asked, "Do you want one, too, Gil?"

Smiling wryly, Gilbert shook his head.

"I'm holding the umbrella. I have to make sure you don't get wet."

"I'm glad your umbrella is so big. Thanks to that, I'm not getting wet at all."

"That's why I have it in the first place."

Gilbert spoke as if that was the most natural thing in the world. Oz looked perplexed: "Huh?"

"If it was just me, I wouldn't use an umbrella. The coat I always wear is enough."

At those words, Oz fell silent for a little while.

Then he said, mischievously, "That's my valet, all right," and nodded in exaggerated approval. His gaze went to the umbrella that spread above him, and he laughed, seeming a little embarrassed.

"Since you're holding that umbrella, even in the rain, the sky's always clear where I am."

This time it was Gilbert's turn to mutter, "Huh?" Oz gestured at the umbrella with the firework tube he held.

"Your umbrella's blue. See?"

That's the color the sky is when it's sunny, he seemed to be telling him.

Gilbert looked up at the umbrella's canopy. When he'd bought the umbrella, he'd chosen blue simply because there hadn't been any other colors. There hadn't been any particular reason.

A blue umbrella, huh…?

Oz went back to playing with fireworks. He really did light two at once, giving little cries of appreciation at the multicolored flames that shot out. "It's like a bouquet," Oz murmured. Then, as if he'd remembered something, he looked up.

"Come to think of it, umbrellas get compared to flowers that bloom in the rain, don't they? In novels and things, I mean."

"Hmm? Yeah, you're right."

"Even if they both get compared to flowers, I guess this is a pretty weird combination, huh?" As Oz spoke, he looked between the umbrella and the flames of the fireworks. Umbrellas were used on rainy days, and

people played with fireworks on clear days. Gilbert agreed with him there.

Still.

"Well…I don't think there's anything wrong with it. They don't have to match."

As he answered, Gilbert smiled faintly.

His mind, which had been oddly gloomy for the past few days, had grown a bit brighter. Looking back at Gilbert, Oz smiled, too.

* * *

There were only a few fireworks left when Oz said, "I forgot these."

They looked like nothing more than a little bunch of thin strings, or maybe fine, twisted paper cords. Back in the room, he'd wondered if they were really fireworks.

Oz pulled the bundle out of the depths of the bag of fireworks and gazed at it, dubiously. He took one string out of the bundle, then flipped it over several times, not sure which end he was supposed to light. Gilbert peered down at Oz's hands and said, "That one, I think," pointing at one of the ends.

"Look," he told him.

"This end's a little fatter. I bet there's gunpowder in there."

"Oh, I see, I get it."

Looking as if it all made sense now, Oz held the opposite end between his fingertips.

Letting the thicker tip hang down, he dexterously struck a match one-handed and brought the flame close to the firework. The paper cord caught. Oz gave a small gulp. The burning paper made a faint sizzling sound, and a smoldering orange bead formed at the tip. It was a tiny, tiny firework lantern.

"Ooh!" Oz cried, momentarily impressed, but almost immediately he murmured, "Huh? That's it?" as if he was disappointed.

But then, the next instant…

The bead began to crackle, shooting sparks. "Wow," he marveled, sighing.

The sparks that sprang from the bead burst again as they fell, becoming little flowers of light.

"Ah……"

Oz caught his breath, gazing at the sight. He'd been drawn in. Whether they were the type launched at festivals or the sort you held in your hands and played with, the fireworks Oz knew were meant to be enjoyed for their fast-burning gunpowder and brilliant colors.

However, the firework he had in his hand now was different. The noise it made was so soft that it could easily have been lost in the sound of the rain if he didn't listen closely, and the sparks that colored the air didn't burst violently, but delicately, modestly, prettily— They made flowers of light bloom.

Neither of them knew it was called a *senko hanabi*, an incense firework.

For a little while, speechless, Oz watched it intently. Then, with a start, he looked up at Gilbert.

"Hey, Gil! Look, it's really cute—"

Just then: *Fzzt.*

All Oz had done was move his hand slightly, but the bead dropped off the end of the cord, fell into the wet grass, and sizzled. Hastily, Oz checked the cord, but it was too late. "Aww," he said, disappointed.

"Oz. Once you light one of those, it looks like you shouldn't move your hand until it goes out."

At Gilbert's words, Oz nodded.

"Again." Oz pulled a new cord out of the bundle and lit it. It lasted longer than the first one, but once again, the bead fell off before it burned out. Frustrated, Oz got another cord. After several repeated attempts, when Oz had learned how to make the bead last quite a lot longer…

anymore."

Oz was the first one to open his mouth. He kept his eyes fixed on the bead at the end of the cord.

"Ah. Because it looked as if we'd just happened to come under a break in the clouds. The rain might start up again."

"Huh. I see."

Oz responded, his attention still focused on the firework.

Gilbert looked up at the umbrella.

The firework-flower, meant to bloom under clear skies, and the umbrella-flower, meant to open in the rain.

True, they were an unbalanced combination, and they didn't match. *Still*, Gilbert thought.

As long as Oz kept moving forward of his own accord, the two of them might become that way as well, but even then. Sometimes, on a whim, they might want to light fireworks in the rain. And, at times like that, he wanted to be able to shield his master from the cold rain.

He hoped that was how it would be.

Whatever happens, I want to be Oz's umbrella…

"Hey, this one's looking good! I think it's going to last all the way to the end!"

Oz's voice was filled with expectation, and Gilbert looked.

The bead at the tip of the paper cord in Oz's hand had shrunk markedly, and the sparks that burst from it had grown sparser and weaker. The end was near. This time, it looked as though he'd manage to keep it from dropping until it burnt out completely. Oz was gazing at the bead intently, not letting his guard down.

"I didn't know. I had no idea fireworks this cute existed. Did you?"

Oz's murmur was deeply impressed. He seemed filled with a childish seriousness that matched his age, and with delight—

With his eyes on his master's profile, Gilbert said:

"Yes, it's cute."

Both the firework, and Oz.

At last, the final incense firework ended, and there were only a few fireworks left in the bag.

Saying "Let's finish up with a bang!" Oz scooped the rest up and lit them all at once. Multicolored fire danced in the moonlight. Oz cheered and jumped around, fireworks in both hands. Gilbert smiled wryly, warning him, "Be careful or you'll burn yourself."

Gentle time passed…

…And just then, a shape barreled toward them from the Pandora Headquarters building.

"Hey, you two—! What do you think you're doing, having fun without me?! That's a hanging offense!"

It was Alice, who should have been asleep.

Alice leapt at Oz with such force that she seemed about to hit him with a flying kick, and Oz cried, “Alice?! Wait, I’m holding fireworks!” Gilbert cut in—“Hey, that’s dangerous!”—but Alice harried them anyway.

“If the rain’s stopped, wake me up! It’s your fault for leaving me out!”

The gentle atmosphere vanished immediately. Being careful to keep the flames from the fireworks pointed away from Alice, Oz said:

“It was raining the whole time. It just now stopped, and—”

“Huh?! …You did them in the rain?”

Alice did know what fireworks were, more or less, and she looked unconvinced. Oz pointed at Gilbert’s blue umbrella, explaining—“That’s why the umbrella”—but Alice still didn’t look convinced.

They were causing a ruckus in the courtyard late at night, and people poked their heads out of Pandora Headquarters here and there and shushed them: “Be quiet!” Somewhere, even a cat gave a disgruntled mew, as though its sleep had been disturbed. Gilbert turned toward the building, bowing apologetically again and again.

As he did so, Oz glanced at Gilbert out of the corner of his eye, then put his lips next to Alice’s ear.

Mischievously, he whispered:

“Gil looked sort of tired, and I thought this might be a good distraction for him.”

~ Fin ~

Taking shelter one rainy day
I'll get an umbrella, okay?!
I'll go get an umbrella!
!?

The Story
of
Clairvoyance

EPILOGUE TALE

The Storyteller's Voice

—Whew.

All right. I've sketched the bare outlines of five stories for you. Which did you want to hear in more detail first? Hmm, they were a bit too long for "outlines," you say? And I spoke too quickly, and all my expressions were overdone, and simply listening tired you out? I see. …I see.

Well, I will admit to having warmed to my topic. …While I was speaking, you know. "Temperament"? Yes, I suppose it is temperament. Ahh, I wish you wouldn't look so annoyed.

I may not look it, but I'm known for being "unexpectedly sociable and easy to get along with." Yes, and when I say that, everyone gives me dubious looks, just as you're doing now. I'm quite used to it. It doesn't bother me. Listen, though, I've been talking all this time by myself, and I've gotten thirsty. I'll just help myself to that tea.

…Oh. It's gone, isn't it. When did that happen?

What? Me? I drank it all? While talking a blue streak? Surely not. Truly? I don't remember that. Are you sure it wasn't you who drank… Beg pardon, I've said something uncalled for again. I shouldn't have doubted you; I apologize.

Please don't be disgusted with me. It's a shame to waste our encounter, our conversation. Why don't we work together to make this time meaningful for both of us?

…Yes, I know, I'll also endeavor to simplify my tales in the future.

I don't want you to dislike me, you see.

Now then, which story should we examine first? Did you have any questions? You leave it up to me. I see.

Were you paying proper attention to the outlines? ……No, never mind. My method of telling them seems to have been partly to blame. In any case, I hope my stories will be of some help to you as you choose your life partner.

I'll start with the story about the boy and the girl, then. Yes, them, the two who appeared in the second story. These two are very close. In fact, I think it's likely that they've never fought at all.

The boy is generally amiable by nature, while the girl can be a bit…or rather, quite *selfish, and self-important, and quarrelsome. The boy is often run ragged by the girl, but he never complains.*

…What's that? Is he just putting up with her? Is putting up with things an inevitable part of living with a partner? My, my, your face has gone quite gloomy. Are you all right?

Well, that's probably true. Still, with these two, it's a bit different. To the boy, the girl's selfishness and self-important, unreasonable manner of

speaking are pleasant things. He feels they give him an honest picture of her heart, you see.

For that reason, the boy sincerely treasures this girl, who deals with him directly and hides nothing.

You look worried. Mm, you aren't confident you can think like the boy?

Heh-heh-heh… Beg pardon, that isn't it. I wasn't laughing at you.

I mean it. I'm not lying. Ah, I do mean it. I only remembered something. A time when the boy was troubled by the girl's willfulness and was feeling terribly blue.

The boy is quite clever at dealing with people, but when the girl made an unreasonable request, he wasn't able to comply with it, and he was also unable to sidestep it. He was tossed about awkwardly from start to finish. Apologies to the individual in question, but he was a sight to behold, a true masterpiece. I did console him, but… Well, the point is, these things do happen.

Well? Was that useful? …You don't know. I see.

…Come to think of it, I was a bit clumsy that day, and

I

ashamed and said, "Thank you." It was a face he could never have shown to his friend had the friend been sober.

Did that story prove useful? Not at all, apparently. Oh, you can't drink, either? Ah, well then.

…Hmm. What next? All right, the story where things weren't going well may actually be more useful, even if it is a negative example.

The story about the brothers, I mean. Where did that one come in the sequence…? It hardly matters. …Third? My. You remember this story well, don't you? The little brother interested you? My friend, you have strange taste in men… No, nothing. Moving on.

Their relationship is…not a partnership, exactly. Well, they are brothers, after all. And they are bound by ties of blood, more strongly than any partners, but their relationship isn't a good one, and that's putting it mildly. …No, they don't hate each other.

The younger brother constantly parades his fondness for his older brother, no matter who's watching.

The older brother does feel affection for his younger brother, but… Yes, he doesn't think he's quite up to dealing with him. He feels small and incompetent around him, as if he doesn't properly understand him… Mm, it's difficult to know how to put it. It's a rather convoluted matter.

In fact, the younger brother does seem to be keeping several secrets from the older brother. Yes, I stumbled onto them by coincidence, and at the time, to be honest, I feared for my life.

The secrets? If I told you about those in detail, it would take a long time, so I'll refrain. …Hmm? You want to hear? No matter what?

Mm, but no, I don't think I'll talk about them. No matter how much time we had, it wouldn't be enough, and even if I talked about them for ages, I doubt you'd understand.

No, don't be angry. The tale is just that troublesome and tiresome, so please, don't be angry. Ah, yes, I certainly could have phrased it better. I apologize. I'll bring some sort of present to make up for it next time we meet. Ask for anything.

In order to cheer you up, then, why don't I talk about a happy…funny story, next? It's about the boy I spoke of earlier. No, no, not more of the story with the girl. The story about the boy and his valet.

You don't remember that one at all? ……I see.

All right, let me tell it again. Yes, I know, "briefly."

It was a rainy night. I was asleep in the building where the two of them live when, all of a sudden, I was awakened by the valet's yell. What a nuisance. I'd been sleeping quite comfortably. I turned in the direction of the yell, intending to complain, and what do you think I saw?

They were lighting fireworks outside. You know what fireworks are, don't you? Yes, the things they launch into the sky on clear days at festivals and things, the ones that sparkle and emit loud bangs. There are small fireworks, nothing as grand as those, that can be held in the hand and played with.

……Yes, that's right.

In the rain, mind you. The valet was holding an umbrella, and the boy was under it. Why were they doing that, you ask?

I couldn't say. I'd love to know the answer to that myself.

It isn't particularly funny? I see. It might be hard to understand just how odd it was without having seen it for yourself.

After that, in retaliation for having my slumber disturbed, I crept up on the valet and startled him. When I called to him suddenly from behind, he turned around, and the moment he saw me, he started extravagantly, slipped, and fell. He and I have met before, but he seems not to like me very much.

I do like him, you know, for my part. It just doesn't go well. Every time I approach him and attempt to make friends, he screams, you see… Haaah.

Ah, enough about me; that isn't important. We're speaking of life partners now. Hmm? That last part was a bit amusing? I'm happy to hear that. Although I do think you're quite rude. Well, what do you think? Have any of the stories you've heard so far been useful?

…I see. That's a pity.

Well, then, would you tell me about this individual, the one you're not certain whether to choose as your life partner? I think I'll be able to tell you a more useful story that way.

……

Ha-haah, you fought hammer and tongs at your first meeting. That must have been terrible. And then your interests didn't match up, your tastes in foods weren't compatible, and you quarreled about every little thing? I see. If someone like that asked to be your life partner, you certainly would hesitate.

All right.

In that case, I think the very first story I told may be the most useful. Do you remember that one at all?

"Vaguely"… Well, I do seem to have taken a very long time to tell it. That's fine.

It was a story about a pair whose interests, preferences, and personalities were completely different, and who seemed entirely incompatible.

I don't quite know what to call the two of them.

They were friends, on equal terms with each other, and they were also master and servant. Their relationship was very… I'm not sure whether I can simply call it "good."

I have a rather close connection with them, you see. They intrigued me, and I often watched them. At first glance, they really didn't appear to feel any affection for each other whatsoever. Their views often clashed, and they'd quarrel.

From their conversations, I learned that their first meeting had been about as bad as it could possibly be.

That's just like you two, isn't it?

Then, a while ago, I picked up something one of them had dropped at Lutwidge Academy. I'd intended to return it immediately, but I couldn't. He

got the idea that I'd stolen it, and he chased me. It was terribly impressive.

I was so frightened that I forgot about giving it back and simply ran—

No, I've made at least half of that up.

It amused me, you see. He normally acted cool and collected, and I'd never seen him look so desperate before; it was funny. My urge to play with him won out over logic. Sometimes such things happen, even to me. …I did regret it later. As you'd expect. Yes.

I managed to return what he'd dropped that night.

Now then.

He chased me with such ghastly force in an attempt to recover something. Do you remember what it was?

…It was a present.

A present his friend had given him. A tasteful leather bookmark. Yes, that's right. It was very precious to him. I'm glad that part came through, even in my tale.

They quarreled constantly, thought nothing of throwing harsh words at each other, and they seemed to be near opposites, but they were always together. It was as if they both considered it only natural. ……Ah, that's right.

I know how to describe them now.

This is just my subjective opinion, but I think it's most appropriate to call them "sworn allies."

That's how it strikes me.

Friends who'd pledged something to each other. I don't know what it was they pledged, and I have no idea if an actual pledge was ever made. Still, there certainly was a pledge between them… At least, that's what I think.

Listen, my friend.

Do you feel a pledge between yourself and the one who may become your life partner?

…I'm sorry. It seems I've made you worry overmuch.

I'd hoped my stories might prove useful, but they don't seem to have done so. I'm not much good, am I…

Hm? What are those two doing now? …Well.

"

never lose them. Because that's…a very sad thing indeed.

All right. We'll meet again.

Oh, that's right. Come to think of it, even though it's our fifth meeting, I haven't introduced myself yet, have I?

My name is

"…Honestly, Snowdrop!"

One evening.

Snowdrop, one of Ada's pet cats, had disappeared from the mansion, and she found him outside. He was in an alley around the first corner in the avenue that ran past the front of the secondary Vessalius residence. When she called to him, Snowdrop—a cat with white fur—nimbly ran back to his mistress.

Ada picked him up. She lifted Snowdrop until his face was level with hers, then gently scolded him with a "Meh!

"Kitty stays home obediently, but you… You know you shouldn't do that."

"Mew! ♪"

In response to his mistress's scolding, Snowdrop just mewed cheerfully. "All right, your dinner is waiting for you. Let's go home." As Ada was about to turn back toward the mansion, she caught sight of something deep in the alley where she'd found Snowdrop.

There was a cat back there. Its coat was grimy; it was probably a stray. In front of the cat sat a single old plate.

"Were you playing with that little one, Snowdrop?"

Snowdrop's only answer to her question was a happy "Mew! ♪" She couldn't tell whether he meant "yes" or "no." Ada crouched down where she stood, smiling at the stray. "Would you like some dinner, too?" she asked. The stray didn't respond. It just watched her, warily.

It probably wasn't used to people. There was no help for it. Ada gave a little sigh. She'd bring it something to eat later, she thought. "Wait for me, please, if you'd like," Ada called to the stray. Then she turned away, going back to the mansion.

As Ada left, the stray cat watched her—or rather, Snowdrop—steadily. As they stepped out of the alley, just before they turned the corner that led to the mansion, Snowdrop mewed. The stray cat gave a small meow in response.

It was as if they were saying, *See you tomorrow.*

Once Ada and Snowdrop were out of sight…

The stray cat licked the completely empty plate, then turned tail and ran deeper into the alley.

In a moment, it had vanished into the shadows.

~ Fin ~

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